

Christmas Eve/Day

December 24/25 2017

Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-14

Thomas Merton, when he first saw the monastery in Kentucky where he would spend the rest of life, said that he felt he was looking at the linchpin that held the world together. But, as I was thinking about this sermon, I thought that that's good way to think of Christ – as the linchpin who holds all creation together – all those things that seem so disparate, so opposite. And then, right on cue, I saw video of a policeman in Portland, ME, standing in the snow in his uniform, singing O Holy Night. And I thought, what a perfect image of the holy breaking into and being unified with the mundane; and it's Christ and Christmas that connects them.

If we were to spend some time thinking of one word that would describe what Christ's coming is about, I think the word would have to be reconciliation. Reconciliation in the sense that his coming knits things together, holds them together. In his very person, he holds together the divine and the human. And more to the point for us, before his birth, there was alienation and separation between God and humans. With this birth, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. The birth of Christ meant that heaven and earth were no longer separate. C.S. Lewis once said that there is nothing now between us and God. And that's because Christ became the bridge, standing between heaven and earth, with one foot in each realm, fully present in both and fully understanding both. Christmas, with all its much-loved traditions, gives us comfort and reassurance, but it also challenges us to walk across that bridge that Christ created. St. Athanasius put it this way: "Christ became what we are that he might make us as he is." The deepest truth about Christmas is that we're called to become as Christ. His presence, his life, is the light that shines upon our reality and that enables us to see God's plan and live in accord with it.

I'd like to spend our time together this evening looking at the divisions that Christ heals, the opposites that he holds together. I've just mentioned the human/divine and earth/heaven divisions, but there are many more in the Christmas story:

We see the squalor of the stable in the midst of Roman splendor. We see the contrast between the angels and the shepherds, between the violence of Roman colonial rule and the peace that the angels proclaim. We see the contrast between the world's view of power as Augustus declares himself the son of God and savior of the world over and against Christ coming to bring a completely different kingdom, the Kingdom of God, which is about love and not about force. In the Christmas story we're presented with the supposed division between the material and the spiritual, and between a surface reality and a deeper truth. Christ holds all that together. It's interesting that he even stands in the division of time, with everything before him designated as Before Christ and everything after as A.D. – in the year of the Lord.

There's one more contrast I'd like to mention and that's the one between the language of the theologians as they contemplate the Incarnation and the language of children and all the stories that have grown up as a kind of constellation around the deep truth of Christmas. So, for instance in the BC/AD division, there's a story about a Sunday School teacher telling the class about Jesus' birth and about Mary needing to ride a donkey to Bethlehem. One of the kids,

whose mother was also about to have a baby, said that she'd be going to the hospital in the family car. "I get it," he said at one point. "BC – before cars; AD, after donkeys!"

This birth of Christ also heals the division between matter and spirit. Luke was writing in a time when Gnosticism was a prominent philosophy. That taught that matter was evil and the best thing you could do was to free the spirit by getting rid of the body and anything else that's material. The Christian faith denies that. In fact, it has been said to be a materialistic faith, not in the sense that we believe that there's only matter, but in the sense that, because of the Incarnation, when God became human and took on a material body, the message was that matter is good and holy; that when flesh and blood participate in the life of God, they are a path to holiness; that every ordinary mortal, every ordinary human being, even every created thing, can show forth God's glory. A children's story here: a minister was doing a children's sermon and talking about how a saintly person had given food to one poor person, clothing to another, shelter to another and, at the end of the day, saw them all gathered around his table, all with the face of Christ. One of the listening kids piped up and said, "Wow! You don't see that every day!" He's right, we don't, but if we begin living as Christ wants us live, maybe that sight will indeed be one we see every day. Maybe this day we'll be given the eyes to see the spiritual in the material. So that matter/spirit division is also healed in Christ. Theologians have put it this way: that matter and spirit are commingled or that matter is infused with spirit, or even more profoundly:

"The Unlimited has become limited; the Undifferentiated has become differentiated; the Undefined has become defined; the infinite has become finite; the Invulnerable has become vulnerable.

Christ stands in the middle there as well, holding it together.

Christmas, more than other holy day, is surrounded by stories and I think that those stories can speak of the truth of the Incarnation and all it means from any number of perspectives. So, for instance, there are stories about forgiveness. One that I remember had to do with the candles we see in many windows these days. The story is that the origin of that is that a son had left home after an acrimonious scene and his mother put the candles in the windows as a sign that he was forgiven and welcomed back. There are stories about generosity, a central truth of Christmas because God gave his son to the world out of an incredibly generous love. Perhaps the best known there is Dicken's *Christmas Carol* in which Scrooge has a complete change of heart. You'll remember that the story ends by saying that "... it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if anyone alive possessed the knowledge." There are stories of amazement. John Shea talks about his 5-year old niece who was telling her own version of the Christmas story and when she was finished, said to her listeners, "And then the baby was born. And do you know who he was? The baby was God," she whispered and leaped into the air, twirled around and dove into the sofa where she covered her head with pillows. It was, Shea thought, the only proper response to the good news of the Incarnation. There are stories of inclusion - think Rudolph, and stories of wonder - think Charlie Brown's Christmas.

One writer tells about going to a public elementary school for a play. Because the school was being cautious about how they did this, they decided to concentrate on family, friends and fun

times during the holidays. The program was called Christmas Love and for the grand finale, a line of kids was supposed to march across the stage with pieces of poster board spelling out the words, "Christmas Love." Their backs were turned to the audience, and at just the right moment, they were supposed to turn around and spell the word with the letters on their poster boards. There were moms backstage to be sure the lineup was in the right order, but when they got on stage, they were on their own. Sure enough, the little girl holding the M in Christmas got her sign turned upside down. So when the big moment came and they all turned around, what the audience saw was not Christmas Love, but Christ was Love. Out of the mouths of babes, right? The deep truth comes out no matter what.

And a final thought. With all the stories and celebrations and ponderings, we're called to one thing and that is to let the child be born in our hearts. If Christmas is about Incarnation, about the permeation of matter by spirit, all matter, including each of us, is suffused by spirit. And the purpose of the customs, stories and legends of Christmas is simply to make that essential truth available to us on an emotional as well as an intellectual level. St. Augustine has said that this birth of God into humanity is always happening, but if it doesn't happen in us, we will have missed the whole point.

In the first reading, Isaiah says that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. That's us – we just need to go forth and shine. A blessed Christmas to you. Amen.