

Christmas Eve 2009

On behalf of the parish staff, a very Merry Christmas to you and yours.

I always feel as if the sermon on Christmas Eve is a little redundant. I mean, what could I possibly add to the hymns and readings of this Feast? So I will be brief.

There was a report recently about a second-grade special needs child in a Massachusetts public school who, when asked to draw something about Christmas for one of his classes, drew a stick-figure picture of Jesus upon the Cross. The teacher deemed the picture “violent,” and the boy was immediately subjected to a forced psychological evaluation before he could return to class. (<http://americanpapist.com/2009/12/photo-this-deserves-detention.html>)

“A rather odd illustration to begin a Christmas sermon with Father,” you think. Perhaps. But the Church Fathers remind us that the events of our

Lord's Nativity are a foreshadowing of the events of Good Friday. Just think: Jesus was born in a cave, later to be buried in a cave. Wrapped in swaddling clothes by his Blessed Mother in Bethlehem, later to be wrapped in a burial shroud. No room for him in the inn at his birth, later to be buried in a borrowed tomb at this death. The babe who lies in a carefully constructed manger constructed of wood and nails will later be fastened with nails to the hard wood of the Cross. So that 8 year old autistic boy who drew the picture of the Cross was onto something! As the Psalmist says (8:2), "Out of the mouths of infants and children, thou hast brought perfect praise."

We all have these images in our heads of a cosy stable, surrounded by meek and gently lowing animals and all too easily forget the reality of a cave, the draughts, the smell – can you imagine the floor?! And the cold.

We are told that Saint Francis created the first live nativity to show to the people of the time the *reality* of the Incarnation. He wanted the poor

themselves to identify with the Christ: a tableau which brought to life the hardship of God *emptying himself out* into this world.

In the words of the Paul's letter the the Phillipians (2:5-11).

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

This is called Paul's *kenotic hymn*, from the Greek, *kenosis*, or self-emptying. The Church has us read this passage on Good Friday, when we think of Jesus emptying himself out on the Cross. But let us not forget that Christ Jesus, the Incarnate Word of the Father, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, emptied himself, took on our human flesh, and stepped down into our world on this very night, some 2000-plus years ago.

This is what Christmas is all about. Christmas is not only a yearly commemoration of the birthday of Jesus. Christmas celebrates the Incarnation, or enfleshment of God. Jesus is God in skin—our skin. As we say in the Creed:

*He is God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God ...
For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, ... he
became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man.*

The Baby in the manger is the *means* by which this happened, but Christmas celebrates the *event* of the Incarnation.

The most radical idea in this or any other faith in the world is the awesome, unlikely, challenging notion that God should so love us, that he would give it all up and step into this world. Not “direct from afar”, not “send angels” or “send prophets” but come amongst us. A risky gesture, an acceptance of the vulnerability that makes up our lives.

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likeness of men.

In other words, this God-with-us, this Emmanuel, was not in charge, but subject. Subject to all of the sensations, emotions, challenges of our lives. He was like us in all things but sin.

Remember this when you're angry or frustrated with God for stuff that's happened in your life: the loss of someone you love, illness, change, turmoil, the very nature of what appears to be a cruel world. Ask yourself why you still choose to shake your fist at the skies when he experienced it all too: loss, poverty, hardship, seeking asylum, and being revealed for who he was and what he had to say of God's love.

Christ Jesus has been there before you. He knows what you experience, and he still loves you, no matter who you are, what you have done, what you are going through.

Tonight, as we lay the bambino in the wood of the manger, and we gaze around at all the candles in this warm room, we should remind ourselves of the reality of this miracle: of God choosing *himself* to empty himself and to be a part of us; to be one of us.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son ...” God loves us. God loves you. And what could I possibly add to that?