

The Nativity of the Lord – Mass During the Day
(Isaiah 52:7-10 / John 1:1-18)
25.12.2017

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

We must take this affirmation of Scripture – which is echoed in the Church's Profession of Faith – very seriously.

What is said here is that **God really became man**. He chose to be one with us, one like us, in every way.

Why did He do this?

The answer is simple and yet so profound: He did this *so that we might become our true selves*.

Eugene Petersen develops this idea of our becoming our true self through the Incarnation in his paraphrase rendering of the Bible *The Message* wherein he translates verse 11 of the Prologue of John's gospel this way: ***Those who believed He was who He claimed to be, those He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.***

Their true selves, their child-of-God selves...

That's to say, men and women who reflect God's way of being.

For many of us to dare to accept our *true self* is an enormous challenge.

If God chose to become fully human in Christ-Jesus, it is clear that this is what our Christian vocation would have all of us seek to become: our true self, our fully human self!

Richard Rohr makes the point that our Christian vocation is not so much about becoming *spiritual beings* as it is about becoming *human beings*.

To be fully human is to be our true self!

To be anything less than fully human is to be less than our true self.

What damage we do to ourselves – and, by extension, to others – when we think our Christian vocation would have us become *spiritual beings* instead of *human beings*.

There are many who foolishly think that *being spiritual* is somehow about becoming dis-incarnate.

In the Christian perspective nothing could be further from the truth.

From the Christian perspective it is Christ's incarnation – and the proper assumption of our own – that leads us to become our *true self*, one with God.

Once someone has come to acknowledge who they truly are – with all that this makes them capable of – that person becomes merciful as God is merciful, compassionate as He is compassionate – and this not only in regard to other people's misery, but also in regard to their own.

Now there's a challenge!

I dare to say that compassion for oneself is harder to exercise than compassion for others.

It is not easy for many of us to appropriate the compassionate love of Christ in a way that applies it to ourselves. And yet this is the fundamental first step required of us if we are ever to be able to extend the Lord's compassion to others in a truly meaningful way.

The psychoanalyst Carl Jung understood this.

In his work *Modern Man In Search of a Soul*, Jung observed: *The acceptance of oneself is the essence of the whole moral problem and epitome of a whole outlook on life. That I feed the hungry, that I forgive an insult, that I love my enemy in the name of Christ – all these are undoubtedly great virtues. What I do unto the least of my brethren, that I do unto Christ. But, what if I should discover that the least amongst them all, the poorest of all beggars, the most impudent of all the offenders, the very enemy himself – that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of all the alms of my own kindness – that I myself am the enemy that must be loved – what then? As a rule, the Christian's attitude is then reversed, there is no longer any question of love or long-suffering, we say to the brother within us 'Raca', and condemn and rage against ourselves. We hide it from the world, we refuse to admit ever having met this least among the lowly in ourselves.*

Given that there is nothing in our humanity that Jesus shunned, why is there so much within ourselves that we deny and turn our back on?

If Jesus was not afraid to take upon Himself our weakness and vulnerability, if He did not shy away from being tempted in every way that we are, if He accepted our struggles and espoused our poverty, what is it that leads us to so despise these signs of the human condition when we encounter them in ourselves and others?

Nothing other than our vanity and pride!

When vanity and pride are allowed to have a grip upon our lives, how intolerant we become, how lacking in mercy, how devoid of compassion and acceptance we show ourselves to be!

In GK Chesterton's short story *The Hammer* the insightful English writer helps us see this. In that story Father Brown standing on the belfry of the church of Bohun Beacon, beside the Rev Wilfred Bohun, who has murdered his brother, Chesterton's fictional priest-detective shares an insight with the guilt-ridden vicar which helps him realise that he has been carried away by his pride and vain religious folly. Father Brown says to the Rev. Bohun that there are *those who are good but not Christian, because hard, imperious, unforgiving – men whose religion is made up by men who prayed on hills and high crags, and who have learnt to look down on the world more than look up to heaven.* Father Brown goes on: *Humility is the mother of giants. One sees great things from the valley; only small things from the peak.*

I believe there is an encouragement for all of us this morning to espouse the humility of Christ who emptied Himself to become one of us.

We must learn to accept the valleys, depths and shadows that are part of our lives, coming to see these not so much as things to be ashamed of, but as areas of our lives which help keep us grounded, humble, truly God-oriented and genuinely charitable... *Good and Christian!*

The effect Christmas should have upon all of us is to make us *good and Christian.*

Our Christmas celebration should lead us as to come into the realisation that what really matters at Christmas is that we come to reflect Christ's own generosity in our dealings with people around us.

Another personage of English literature comes to mind this morning. I think here of Charles Dickens' character Ebenezer Scrooge whom we encounter in *A Christmas Carol.*

Through his visions Scrooge is led to undergo a radical conversion. He who had hitherto shunned Christmas goodwill and cheer is led to declare: *Now I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all year round.*

To keep Christmas well is to keep it every day and in every setting of our lives; it is to become what we are told Ebenezer Scrooge became: *as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as good as the good old city knew, or any good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world.*

***To keep Christmas well* demands of all of us that we become our *true self* and that amounts to giving flesh to Christ in our lives, being as generous in merciful love as the Jesus of the gospels was... as He still is and ever will be.**

Eugene Petersen's rendering of verse 14 of the Prologue tells us that this means being *generous inside and out, true from start to finish.*

May the gift we receive this Christmas be our own *true self* and may the gift we offer to others this Christmas be the same: may we present our true self to them in a way that awakens within them a sense of their own *true self*.

May we all be led to grow in our resemblance to Jesus this Christmastide!

Amen!