

Christmas Day  
(Isaiah 52:7-10 / John 1:1-18)  
25.12.2019

We are here this morning because we want to receive Jesus' coming to us in the sacrament of the Eucharist as we celebrate the Christmas Feast. To our desire to receive Jesus the word of God speaks, in response, this message of life: *To all who received Him He gave power to become children of God.* The Christmas event and our participation in the Eucharist make us children of God. We need to ask ourselves this morning, just what being a child of God really means for us.

The epistles of St John which the Church's liturgy has us listen to throughout the Christmas season at the weekday Eucharists help us give an answer to that question.

What comes across in the Johannine epistles is that our belonging to God's family will be evidenced by our resemblance to our Heavenly Father and to Jesus, who, elsewhere in the New Testament, is hailed as *our elder brother in the faith*. We know from Christ's *Farewell Discourse* in John's gospel that *to have seen Him is to have seen the Father*. To resemble Jesus is therefore to resemble the One whom the Father sent into this world to reveal Himself to us. If we belong to the Lord's family and truly live as a child of God, we will be animated by Spirit of love which unites the Father and the Son. To live as a child of God is to be caught up into the life of the Blessed Trinity.

Vital to our identity as God's children will be our love for others. We remember what Jesus tells us in John's gospel when He states that we are *to love one another as He has loved us*. The Johannine epistles make the point that it is by their love for each other that God's children are recognisable. Our love for others will be made manifest by our willingness, desire and commitment to extend to them signs of God's love for them. Having *known and placed our faith in God's love for us* (1 John 4) we will want to share it with all around us. To share God's love with others in a credible way we must have first experienced it for ourselves and truly believed in it.

As children of God what we are called to bear witness to, what one spiritual writer has called, *the wisdom of accepted tenderness*. Children of God touched by the knowledge that they are thoroughly loved by their Heavenly Father will be men, women and children animated by the tenderness of God. They will be tender-hearted in their turn. Their tender-heartedness in regard to those most in need of signs of care and compassion will reveal that they are true children of God, because *merciful as our Heavenly Father is merciful, compassionate as He is compassionate*.

At the very heart of the revelation of God's love stands forgiveness. Forgiveness is the core of Jesus' proclamation of the Good News. For this reason, it should be at the very centre of all Christian living. Given this, the true child of God will be a forgiving person. Pope Francis gave this sense to the *Great Jubilee Year of Mercy*. During that great *Jubilee Year of Mercy* the Church had God's people sing in a constant refrain: *Misericordes sicut Pater... Merciful like the Father*. In echo to that declaration, come to mind those words the Church's liturgy has us sing every morning at lauds, the Morning Prayer of the People of God. I think of this line taken from the biblical text of the *Benedictus*: *The tender mercy of the heart of our loving God has visited us like the dawn from on high*.

Let us dwell for a longer moment on the importance of forgiveness, given its place at the heart of Christianity.

According to John, the key hallmark of God's children will be their desire and their willingness to offer pardon – to forgive even their enemies, with the help of God's grace. In Luke's gospel we read: *Listen all of you. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Pray for the happiness of those who curse you; implore God's blessing on those who hurt you.* Again and again the gospels portray for us a God willing to forgive to the point of total extravagance. Many echoes of this call are to be heard throughout all four gospel accounts.

God's children will be ready to go against the way of this world: a world which can be so brutally harsh and so terribly unforgiving. I was struck to listen to a reading of Fr Timothy Radcliffe's recent book in which he dares to name the shocking way in which so many channels of communication in today's world set themselves up as judge, jury and executioner in regard to those who get things wrong – those who err or sin in any way. Often these people will be publicly shamed and condemned, without any possible recourse to defence... and this without even the beginning of a fair hearing of their side of the story. If God's children are called to counter-cultural, today that will mean, among other things, being slow to judge in a world quick to condemn.

However hard it is for us to accept this, the call of the gospel which is addressed to all God's children, is to go beyond what is humanly possible and to forgive. Let us not hide the fact that the way we are asked to take to heart here is not an easy one to follow. To forgive will be as demanding of us as it was for Jesus: it will sometimes prove to be nothing less than a crucifying experience.

Just think of how much pain we feel when we find ourselves let down by those we have loved and to whom we have dared entrust ourselves. Their betrayal is something we feel acutely. The forgiveness we are called to offer them is more than just humanly demanding; it is simply not possible for us as long as we rely on our own strength alone, but it becomes possible for us to the extent that we engage ourselves in a process of growth in resemblance to our Heavenly Father. When we become like the Father we find that in the power of God we are able to do what we cannot do by themselves alone. It is important for us to remember how Christ prayed on the cross: *Father, forgive them.* As God's children we have to ask the Father to do for us what we cannot do ourselves: we must open our hearts to the possibility of Him doing in and through us what is beyond us. To realise this is to have entered into and to be living by *the wisdom of accepted tenderness* to which I already alluded.

Every true child of God will be a universal brother or sister. The fact that we are God's children will be verified by the manner in which we react to and treat all people. All people! Whatever their background, whatever their race, whatever their culture, whatever their religious affiliation, whatever their social class, whatever their sexual orientation.

The true child of God will see every person as another self. Children of God will see every person they meet as part of the same family of God to which they belong. This is because true children of God will consider the Lord to be the gracious Creator and Father of all humankind.

The true child of God will see others as God sees them: that's to say, as lovable and as good.

Finally, another hallmark of a true child of God will be his or her humility. Throughout the ages humility has been recognised to be the hallmark of God's presence in a person's life. The psalmist, and the great mystics after him, unite in saying that great humility looks like a small child. They have seen and they invite us to realise that true divine greatness and

genuine human greatness have come together in a unique way in the child whose birth we celebrate today: the Baby Jesus, the Infant Christ, in whom each one of us is called to become a child of God.