

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” Christmas Midnight  
Isaiah 9: 1-6 Psalm 96 Titus 2: 11-14 Luke 2: 1-14  
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Merry Christmas!

Christmas means a lot of options for preaching. There are masses for the vigil, midnight, dawn, and for the day--- all with specific readings. I am sure we won't be preaching at each of these liturgical celebrations. Thus, I thought it would be helpful to focus on the Gospel for the midnight mass, but to do so in a general way, so as to help the preacher's thinking about the feast itself. Perhaps these thoughts will be helpful promptings for whatever reading you are focusing on for your preaching. I am relying heavily on two sources I used at this time last Christmas. I hope you don't mind this Dominican quoting a letter from the Master of the Order to our sisters and brothers. I found it helpful in preparing a Christmas preaching.

Even though the readings for the Christmas season follow a "theme" that centers on the birth and early life of Christ, this liturgical time is not independent of the other seasons, not set off in its own little niche. Christmas and these Sundays we celebrate the Holy Family (Dec. 27), and the Epiphany (January 3), are of a piece. Each of these feasts is an "epiphany" in its own right, each revealing and opening our minds to God through all that Christ does and says. But the "epiphanies" do not stop as we enter the new year, the "ordinary Sundays," they continue right up to Jesus' death and resurrection. What we see or understand about Christmas, only comes by the light of the resurrection. While we celebrate the birth of Christ, we do so mindful of who he is and what will become of him.

Let's not be sentimental as we preach the birth of Christ, for we know what is going to happen to him, he will be rejected and put to death. The symbolic details of today's Gospel make the point clear--- there is no room for him in the world's inn, in "the place where travelers lodged." The symbolic details of the Nativity story are so familiar to us that we miss the Good News these symbols proclaim. The newborn is wrapped in "swaddling clothes" and laid in a manger. This is more than a quaint picture of a newborn child. Every newborn Jewish child was so wrapped; here is a reminder of his entry into the very specific world of a particular people with its own religion, culture, and identity. Like us, he is also born into the specifics of a people with their hopes and fears. In his case, those he is born

among are an enslaved people who are awaiting God to come to their help---but not in the way God chose to come!

"The New York Times Magazine" (December 7, 1997) had a special edition dedicated to "God Decentralized." Barbara Grizzuti Harrison (p. 73), who had formally been a Jehovah Witness, reflects on the Incarnation and makes an important link to Jesus' suffering and death. She writes:

At the core of my belief is the Incarnation, which breaks and exalts my heart. One could simply not wish to approach a God who had not shared the human condition and who did not suffer. ("Oh, Loving Madman! Was it not enough for Thee to become Incarnate, that Thou must also die?"--St. Anselm.) The greatest drama ever told is the greatest justification of faith.

To say that the incarnation is at the heart of belief is also to say that the orthodox Trinitarian model is at the heart of my belief. The Witnesses insisted that Jesus was merely a Son of God, not God Himself [sic]; but how He is very much less desirable and attractive He is if He is only Daddy's brave best boy, prophet, social worker, revolutionary. It is because God suffered in His flesh and soul the torments and anguish of human life that we, broken and askew, are able to cast ourselves upon Him.

Hippolytus, martyr and saint, wrote of Christ: "His divine spirt gave life and strength to the tottering world, and the whole universe became stable once more, as if the stretching out, the agony of the Cross, had in some way gotten into everything." For me, He has gotten into everything. I see Him in the timely, unaffected gestures of friendship and in the unruly passions of human live; I see Him in the face of a doctor who serendipitously entered my life at a time which I thought I had no more life left. I saw Him once and will see Him forever in a dead teacher of mine, who rescued my injured spirit.

I see him in my daughter's merry eyes and in the merry play of her mind; I see him in my son's hands, the hands of a painter who loves the given world.

"Give the benefit of the doubt to the poor," a saint writes, "unless it is proven otherwise." I try to see him in the poor.

I also share with you all a letter the Master of the Dominican Order wrote to us a six years ago. It is a reflection on the Gospel for this day, and I think it speaks to

more than members of the Order of Preachers.

## CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FROM THE MASTER OF THE ORDER (December 1992)

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled." [Luke 2:1] Mary and Joseph are brought to Bethlehem by the command of the Emperor. Like everyone else they must be registered. They must submit to the will of the power that governed their world, which could count and tax all its members. Their journey is a symbol of powerlessness in the face of the biggest bureaucracy that history had ever known until then.

But all the while God was quietly working in the labyrinths of history and bringing the pregnant mother to the place where the Christ must be born. The bureaucrats were unknowingly bringing the Lord of freedom to his home for birth. The God of irrepressible freedom was there, working his [sic] purpose invisibly, like a judo fighter who uses the strength of the enemy to achieve his own aim.

Perhaps the temptation of our age is fatalism, the belief that nothing can be done, that the powers of this world are too strong for us. Most countries in the Third World are losing the fight against poverty; in Africa the tide seems to have ebbed in the movement towards democracy; in Europe and America the recession seems to have come to stay, and millions resign themselves and their children to permanent unemployment. In Eastern Europe old quarrels break out again, ancient resentments that seem doomed to be passed on from one generation to another. Is there anything that can be done?

We are told that the laws of economics, like the laws of nature, are immutable and we must obey. And even within the Order there can be the temptation towards fatalism. Can our provinces renew themselves and find again that enthusiasm and madness for the gospel that marked our beginnings? Can we transform our communities? It is easy to feel ourselves trapped by the past, without the freedom for new initiatives. And any of us can find ourselves personally in impossible situations, in which every choice seems the wrong choice, and we feel ourselves to be prisoners of our own mistakes. We are easily infected with the weariness of the age and resign ourselves "to what must be."

But this is the month in which we remember the birth of the Lord of freedom, who

gently subverted the powers that would rule the world. In Christmas we celebrate the God who is always young, and who opens the doors to liberty when we may have felt them closed. He is the God who is endlessly creative and inventive and uses the most unpromising events to lead us to a place where, unexpectedly, there can be a birth. He can open our ways and make them paths to freedom.

The shepherds go to Bethlehem to "see this thing that has happened." It is only a small thing, not impressive, and easily missed, the birth of a poor child. Perhaps it is only poor and insignificant people like the shepherds, held to be thieves and bandits and liars, who would be able to spot it. The powerful would never notice. And if we would wish to see "this thing that has happened" we must share their powerlessness and dare to be with people in their moments of poverty, of uncertainty and puzzlement and even of defeat. Then we will be able to see the small things that happen which show that the Lord is born again, and we will share in the joy of the shepherds. I think of a small Ecumenical community in Belfast, on the border between the ghettos of the Catholics and the Protestants, where the women from both sides come to share their sorrows.

Frei Betto, our brother, described Christmas night in a prison in Brazil: "Christmas night in prison...Now the whole prison is singing, as if our song alone, happy and free, must sound throughout the world. The women are singing over in their section, and we applaud.... Everyone here knows that it's Christmas, that someone is being reborn. And with our song we testify that we too have been reborn to fight for a world without tears, hatred oppression. It's quite something to see these young faces pressed against the bars and singing their love...Unforgettable. It's not a sight for our judges, or the public prosecutor, or the police who arrested us. They would find the beauty of this night intolerable. Torturers fear a smile, even a weak one."

The poet Yeats said, "When one looks into the darkness, there is always something there." If we look hard enough we can always see the traces of the God of irrepressible freedom, who is there inviting us help ...to make things new. Maybe there is only a small sign, too small for the great people of this world to spot, but we can learn to see it and rejoice.

The night that the Chapter [a legislative meeting of the Orders' elected representatives] ended in Mexico City, we celebrated a wonderful Mass that gathered together the whole Dominican Family. We then went and held a last

party before we went back to our home Provinces. As we made our way home, under the trees at the side of the street a family prepared for the night. The parents changed the clothes of the three children, caressed them, tucked them up in blankets, and made a home for them in the night. They were not defeated.

Wishing us all the freedom that helps to make things new.  
Your brother in St. Dominic,  
fr. Timothy Radcliffe, O.P.  
Master of the Order

A Christmas Prayer  
MAY THEY GIVE YOU GLORY FOR US O LORD

Praise to you now and evermore

May they give you glory for us, O Lord--  
the Virgin Mary whose child you were,  
and the carpenter Joseph who made you his own.  
Praise to you now and ever more!

May they give you glory for us, O Lord--  
the angels who, singing, praised your birth,  
and the manger wherein, as a child, you lay.  
Praise to you now and ever more!

May they give you glory for us, O Lord--  
the Shepherds who came to worship you,  
and your mother herself, who marveled at you.  
Praise to you now and ever more!

May they give you glory for us, O Lord  
the Bethlehem infants who died for you,  
and the martyrdom of the hearts of their mothers.  
Praise to you now and ever more!

May they give you glory for us, O Lord--  
the Wise Men who journeyed from far in the East,  
and their brilliant star aloft in your sky.

Praise to you now and ever more!

May they give you glory for us, O Lord--  
old Simeon holding you clasped in his arms,  
and Anna the prophetess,  
whose age your coming did bless with joy.

Praise to you now and ever more!

At this time of your holy birth,  
O Jesus Lord, we pray to you:  
Let all our lives bring glory to you,  
and because your birth was here on earth,  
give us someday our own birth in heaven  
for one eternal Christmas.

(from : COME LORD JESUS, by LUCIEN DEISS)

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,  
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