

The Solemnity of the Nativity of our Lord-Christmas Mass
December 25, 2014/ Cathedral of Saint Paul
Readings: Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” With these words, the Gospel of St. John reminds us that indeed Jesus Christ is the light for whom all humanity has been waiting. Here in the northern hemisphere, the symbolism of the light and darkness is particularly apt. Just a few days ago on the 4th Sunday of Advent, we plunged to the nadir of darkness- the Winter Solstice. On that day, the sunlight lasted for just 8 hours and 46 minutes. That is nearly seven fewer hours of daylight than just six months ago. But after sunset on December 21st, the light began to triumph once again, both meteorologically and much more importantly, spiritually speaking.

The Christmas message is contained in the readings for the various Masses for this feast, whether yesterday in the evening, at Midnight, the Mass at Dawn or the Mass during the day. Each has its own special character and emphasis, but on Christmas Day we rejoice in the light of the Word made flesh. It is difficult to conceive of the “Word” as such, and much easier to relate to a tiny baby in a manger. And yet that child is himself the Light of the World, the Son of God, who assumed a human nature in order to accomplish our salvation in it.¹

The Good News was neither directed solely to the shepherds in the field, nor only to us in this Church today. The Good News was then and is today for all people, for all humanity shrouded in the darkness of our own sin. The God who is shrouded in mystery reveals himself in the person of a tiny and innocent child. Jesus Christ is the limitless or un-encompassed light.²

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. # 461

² Gregory the Great, (*Hom in Evang. xviii, 1*); Bernard of Clairvaux, (Sermon #26) “*lumen incircumscripsum*”

The transition from darkness to light is one of the most basic and yet profound symbols of spiritual progress.³ The Church Fathers saw contemplation as the human endeavor “to fix the eye of the heart on the very ray of the un-encompassed Light.”⁴ One early writer tried to capture the reality of spiritual union by means of a simple image:

Imagine a great shining chain hanging downward from the heights of heaven to the world below. We grab hold of it with one hand and then another, and we seem to be pulling it down toward us. Actually it is already there on the heights, and down below instead of pulling it to us, **we are being lifted upward** to that brilliance above, to the dazzling light of those beams.⁵ (emphasis added)

In the cold, darkness and stillness of a Minnesota winter, we gather in this Church to celebrate Christmas, the Nativity of Our Lord and Savior. Christmas represents the pre-eminent act of the self-emptying love of God, the light coming to dispel the darkness of our sin.

In descending to earth in the person of Jesus, God also pulls us up towards the heights of heaven. While God may seem unapproachable from one perspective, yet on this day He desires to dwell amongst us in utter simplicity and silence.

Still, many are afraid today due to the tremendous uncertainty in our world. Christians in some parts of the world live in terror for their lives from those who seek to expel all vestiges of the Christian faith from its historic roots. Closer to home, are we able to speak of our nation as being “one nation under God,” or is that too becoming a meaningless slogan?

³ *Architecture of Silence: Cistercian Abbeys of France*, Terryl Kinder, 2000

⁴ Gregory the Great “Cordis oculus figere in ipso radio incircumscriptae lucis intendit,” (*Mor.* xxiii,42)

⁵ Dionysius, *Divine Names* DN, 3.1 (680C).

There are many other reasons for uncertainty, but we must ask if this is the response of faith proper to our situation? Once we are tempted to think that God is not ultimately “in charge,” our belief in Divine Providence begins to wane and we are left to our own designs. And then we surely begin to falter and give into the darkness.

In faith and discipleship, we are invited to behold God’s face in the presence of a tiny and helpless child. Today, all of our concerns for the future, our problems, disappointments and failures – all these may be placed before the Crib, and laid there to rest, at least for now.

For to us a Savior has been born in our midst, and He came to bring light to all the darkness of our lives. The limitless Light of God has been focused and concentrated this day into but a tiny spot, a place, a focal point that is the most unlikely of places– a manger, a stable for animals. And yet the shepherds sing; they rejoice, for God has come to them. We do not have to search for God; He is coming to find us, and this is the reason for our joy today.

Our mighty God ventured into the night of silence, a reverent silence, a profound simplicity, and he ventured there to find and save us. The Light of Divine Love has come into our world anew. May the silence and peace of this solemn and joyous day abide in your hearts forever.