

Homily: December 22-23, 2007

Today's liturgy is directed entirely to the birth of Jesus, our Savior—what it means in itself and for the whole world. To appreciate that birth, we must realize that we need a savior. We need a savior because of the sin of Adam and our own personal sins, which result in our condemnation to death. So the link between Adam and Christ is direct; from Adam we inherit sin and from Christ we receive the gift of grace to remove that sin. Before Christ, man was alone, isolated, immersed in sin with no exit. But the God of love took pity on man and revealed himself to a small band of Hebrews; through them he promised salvation for all.

The point of Christmas—the birth of Christ—is that God has fulfilled his promises. He has come personally into human history to save us. Thus he is with us—Emmanuel. We are no longer alone—we have a Savior who is with us in the Mass, in the tabernacle, in the Church and in the sacraments.

The Gospel today emphasizes the effect of the Incarnation on Joseph, that just man. He is perplexed at the pregnancy of Mary. He does not understand, so he decides “to divorce her quietly.” According to Jewish law, she was already his wife even though they did not yet live together. Perhaps he felt himself unworthy to be married to her who was about to become the mother of the Messiah.

While Joseph is pondering what to do, the angel of the Lord in a dream explains to him how Mary conceived and who the child is—Jesus the Savior. There were no sonograms in those days, but the angel told him that Mary would give birth to a boy. Matthew sees the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, given in the first reading, in the conception and birth of the child from a virgin.

Joseph the Just obeyed God and took Mary as his wife. He asks no questions; he is not quoted as having said anything; he believed God. He believed God and because he believed he was obedient and humble—these are the virtues we should strive to acquire for ourselves. Joseph provided a home for Jesus and Mary—he supported and protected them. It is difficult to fathom the sanctity of Joseph. Every day he looked into the face of

Jesus who is both God and man. He held Jesus in his arms; he taught him how to be a carpenter and how to speak; he listened to him and spoke with him every day.

In the second reading St. Paul gives his credentials as an apostle to the Romans. He says that Jesus Christ descended from David according to the flesh, but is also the Son of God in power. This passage is placed here in order to affirm the true humanity of Jesus and his divinity. He is true man and true God at the same time. He is the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Old Testament. When we look at Jesus in the crib, we should ask ourselves: “Who is this child of Mary and Joseph?”

Some early heretics, called Docetists, denied that Jesus was truly human; they said he only appeared to be a man. But he was born like us, a helpless infant. He grew up to manhood: “He advanced in wisdom, age and grace.....” He suffered hunger and thirst; he became tired, he slept, he was tempted by the devil, he cried over Jerusalem, he died a painful death on Calvary. He was fully human—kind, compassionate, patient and loving.

The Creed says that he is God from God. Other heretics, called Arians, denied this, just as many today do not accept the divinity of Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father. Through him, the eternal Word of God, all things were made. So the Church rejects Docetism and Arianism.

Today’s readings affirm the birth of Jesus as a true human being—true man, just like us. But he is the most important man who ever set foot on this earth because he is God. All history is related to him—everything before and after his time on earth.

At Christmas we celebrate his entrance into the world—and so into our life, since we are a part of his world. He is the only one who can give true meaning to our life and our existence. A successful life means living for him and with him. He is our personal Savior, because he takes away our sins and leads us into eternal life.

We rejoice at Christmas time because we are not alone, because he is with us, because he is Emmanuel. This great truth fills us with joy and hope. Let us rejoice, therefore, with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, and even the sheep and animals around the crib in Bethlehem, because God is with us. That is the meaning of Christmas.

Jesus himself said it best at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel: "Behold, I am with you all days, even to the end of time."

Our most familiar Advent hymn begins "O come, O come, Emmanuel." When we sing it, we stand beside the psalmist, Isaiah, Paul and Matthew, and we profess our faith in Jesus as Emmanuel in the flesh, as God's presence within our common humanity. We also look forward to the fullness of God's presence in his kingdom. The great Advent hope is expressed in the name "Emmanuel."