

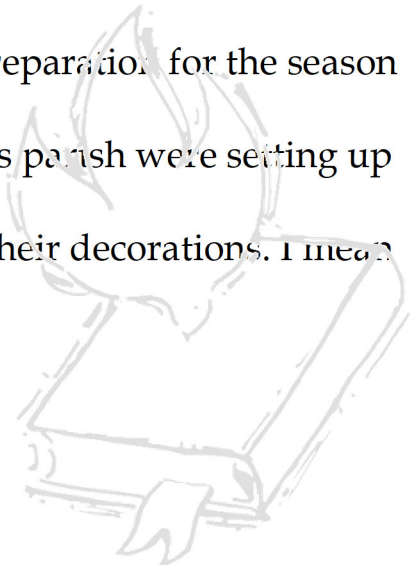
Homily

Christmas - B

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Some time back, I had the opportunity to hear the confessions of a group of kids who were preparing for Santa by telling me the times they were naughty and the times they were nice. I actually like hearing the confessions of children - for the most part, I like to give penances where the kids get to go home, give their parents a hug and tell them how much they love mom and dad. These little things matter to me and should matter to all of us who possess faith - the little things often are the gifts that are not recognized but make all the difference in the world.

So as I was listening to these kids' confessions, I noticed from a distance that the volunteers of this parish church in particular were putting up all their Christmas decorations in preparation for the season yet to come. Inside their church, the folks of this parish were setting up this monster big nativity scene in the midst of their decorations. I mean



the nativity set was **HUGE** – I was joking that the nativity was so elaborate that it probably housed indoor plumbing, a gourmet kitchen and a hot tub for those cold nights after travelling a long distance to Bethlehem.

After reflecting on that huge monster nativity that I saw, I started to realize how so many of us churches in the area put up what might be seen as overindulgent nativity sets. Some sets have the shepherds and wise men and green alligators and long-necked geese, some humpy back camels and some chimpanzees (if you are from the “Ray Raynor” generation, you will understand the reference). Every Christmas, the kids ooh and aah over these “over the top” nativity displays and, under normal circumstances, I would be delighted that folks (even for a brief moment) would be interested enough in the nativity story that the image of the manger scene would get them to think a little bit more about the faith and their purpose in life.

For me at least, the image of the monster huge nativity scene paled in comparison to the actual place where Christ was born, a place I had a

chance to visit earlier this month with a number of sojourners who visited the Holy Land on pilgrimage. On the second day of our tour, our group had a chance to stop at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem to visit the spot that is recognized as the place of Christ's birth as well as celebrating the Mass on the other side of that spot, against the wall that touched the place where Christ entered the world.

After the Mass concluded, we were taken to the spot of this nativity scene. The moment I saw Christ's place of birth, my whole perception of nativity sets changed completely. After I encountered that image, I knew that the monster nativity sets that we often construct do not match the bible story of Christmas exactly. We know that the gospel of Luke focuses on the stories of the shepherds, not the wise men. We know that the gospel of Matthew focuses on the story of the wise men, not the shepherds. Nowhere in the nativity stories from the gospels do we learn about what animals surround the baby Jesus nor are we told about an angel above the crib nor the baby remaining silent in his place of birth. In reality, we are not told all that much about Jesus' birth in the sacred

scriptures, except that when Jesus was born, he was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger – a feeding trough from which animals eat to be exact – because Mary and Joseph could not find any room at the inn (Lk 2: 12).



On the second day of our trip, when we visited that Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, we sojourners were led through steep and narrow paths to a very small, cramped, intimate chapel where we were able to celebrate Mass before going to visit the spot of Christ's birth. The spot for Mass was perfect – the sentiment of intimacy,

quiet and the presence of God filled the small space where we gathered together to pray. One of our travelers chose to bring his guitar on the occasion, where we were able to sing *Silent Night* together, a song originally intended to be played on the guitar when the church organ in Oberndorf, Austria did not function the morning of Christmas Eve.

Once the Mass had concluded, our tour guide walked us around the chapel to the actual place where scholars and archaeologists tell us that Jesus was born. Instead of a stable, instead of some huge image of a Nativity with running water and cable tv, we encountered yet another hole in a rock as we had visited so many times on that pilgrimage. We



learned that St. John the Baptist was born in the same type of cave, that Jesus was buried in the same type of cave and, in reference to the Christmas feast, that Jesus was born in such a humble fashion as well. The spot where Jesus was born is even marked with a special star, which we were encouraged to venerate for a

moment before the scores of others behind us had the opportunity to do the same.

After we had the chance to venerate that special place so *unlike* the image that we often associated with Jesus' birth, our tour guide had us

gather nearby this hole in the rock to sing, once again, the song of the *Silent Night*, which this time seemed even more appropriate than when we sang this hymn just previously at Mass.

For me at least, this image of the hole in the rock and the stillness of the moment reminded me why and how Christ came into the world and the manner in which we are called to respond to this coming. As I have learned so often in the world of faith, Christ did not make himself present on the blow of the trumpet or the charging of the stallions. For Christ, this servant, this God-man incarnate, he chose to enter this world in a hole, to serve others instead of us serving him, to enter Jerusalem on the back of a donkey rather than in a chariot led by a stallion. For Christ, he entered the world in a little way and was buried in a tomb in a little way.

This image is exactly the one that reminds me how to celebrate Christmas, both as a priest and as a Christian. The more I am invested in this faith, the more I realize that the little things I do, the simple quiet things I do, more often than not have a greater impact than the big

things that are recognized by those around me. By offering a smile, a kind word or an extended hand, by taking care of the poor and needy or those with a less fortunate condition, by approaching others with a loving disposition as if they were our brother or sister – these things are what I learned about that little hole, a sentiment I wanted to share with those kids on the day of their confession last week, that I want to share with you today. I wanted to teach the kids, I wanted to teach *myself*, that the little things we do each day in God’s name reflect the little thing that Christ did to enter the world, a little thing that made an infinite difference in our lives.

Perhaps later on this day you may travel around the city to view the beautiful decorations, the carolers singing door to door or even the large monster nativity sets that remind us of God but not at all remind us of the simplicity that this season has to offer. If we recognize the simplicity, if we recognize the humility of this image, then we recognize the way we can respond to this humble image of the hole in the cave that I present to you today. Certainly this is easy enough of a gift that can be

offered every day of our lives to show that what Christ did for us was not in vain but, rather, the model and path that we must follow to honor this Christmas moment, to honor the Christ who was with us at the beginning and whom we choose to be with at the end.

So on this Christmas day, as you open the big boxes and clean up the bigger messes, perhaps you can share in that little gift that reflects this image of our Lord's nativity. Perhaps tonight at the dinner table we can give thanks to those around us for being part of our family. Perhaps we can give the members of our family a hug and a good word. Perhaps we should not relegate these small, kind acts to one day but instead to every day.

May your Christmas day and season be a blessed one, both in the big things you do but, more importantly, in the small ones as well. May we embrace that "hole in the wall" that commemorates the Lord's birth by investing ourselves in the love of others. That is the greatest of gifts – sometimes seen as the smallest of gifts, easy to give and not expensive at all to our wallets. May you all have a Blessed Christmas as we give

thanks together for that beautiful, intimate *Silent Night* that marks this holiday. This is our prayer.