

HOMILY

The Dawn Mass on Christmas Day

December 25, 2008 – Year B

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Today, the 25th of December, we celebrate the birthday of our Savior, traditionally called Christmas! But how do you know that Jesus was born on the 25th of December? Is there anything in the Bible that tells us that Jesus was born on the 25th of December? Some of us may have had the experience of people asking us questions like these to embarrass us. The Church has come to celebrate the birthday of the Savior on December 25 in the course of her history. She had a couple of reasons for fixing the Solemnity on the 25th of December.

1. The early Church in Rome had Christianized several pagan Roman practices and festivities making them into Christian practices and festivities. One of them is Christmas. Many scholars believe that Christmas came to be placed on December 25 in order to replace a pagan celebration called the *Birth of the Unconquered Sun*, a feast established by the Roman Emperor Aurelian in A.D. 274. Since December 25 was the date of the winter solstice according to the Roman calendar (the shortest day in a year, after which days began to be longer), it was chosen as the date of rejoicing for the Sun's victory over darkness. It became the birthday of the Unconquered Sun!

When Christianity was approved as the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Church chose this day to celebrate the birth of *the true Sun—the Son of God*—who conquers the power of darkness, the darkness of sin.

2. There is another reasoning which gives Biblical support for celebrating Christmas on the 25th of December. It claims that the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah occurred during the feast of Yom Kippur, celebrated by the Jews around September 25. The birth of John the Baptist, coming nine months after that, should have taken place on June 25.

The angel told Mary at the Annunciation that Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her pregnancy. That brings us to March 25 as the day of the Annunciation event and the day of the conception of Jesus. The birth of the Savior nine months later comes around December 25.

Historically, we do not know the exact date of the birth of the Savior. It is generally accepted that Jesus was born in the year 4 B.C. While Matthew places the birth of Jesus against the background of Herod's reign, Luke places it against the background of the Roman Empire.

Does the knowledge of the exact day and year of the event affect the solemnity of our celebration in any way? The point of the celebration is not that. Father Raymond Brown in his masterful book on the Infancy Narratives says that these stories are *theologumena*, not so much literal history but stories with a theological point—the gratuitous and revolutionary impact of Jesus' birth, life and death. The important thing to remember, therefore, is that they are stories of God's love and Jesus' role in history. That's what counts, not the historical details. That is what should affect us, too!

Luke in his simple language introduces a contrast between two kings or emperors—the emperor of Rome, Cesar Augustus, and the Emperor of the Universe, the King of Kings, Jesus. Might and majesty, power and glory accompanied the Roman emperor. He sent fear to wherever he went or to wherever he sent his invincible army. On the contrary, the King of Kings, the Lord of the Universe, when he is born on earth, there is no army that is ready to set out on conquest, spreading fear among the nations. There is an army of a multitude of angels that sings of peace. “*Glory to God in the highest and on earth **peace** to those on whom his favor rests.*”

The birth of the King of Kings *dispels fear*. The angel said to the shepherds,

“***Do not be afraid**; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord.*” (Luke 2:10-11)

That is to say, here is one who will lift his people from their fears! He is not the one who adds more fears to our existing ones.

The Romans thought of Caesar Augustus as a savior. *Pax Romana*, the great peace of the Roman Empire, was at its zenith during his time. However, Augustan peace was fragile. After his death, other men assumed power, men like Nero and Caligula, whose names would be synonymous with treachery and cruelty.

The angels introduced a different kind of emperor, a Savior who would continue his saving work throughout human history. The Savior of the first century is also the Savior of the twenty-first century. The Savior of Israel is also the Savior of the world. The Savior is for all peoples and all times. Since Luke was a Gentile convert, he establishes at the very beginning of his Gospel that the Savior is not just for the people of Israel but for all the people, “...*a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord.*” (Luke 2:11)

Worldly might and majesty, power and glory, do not accompany the King of Kings. He is humble and lowly, having no place even to be born. His mother and father had to be satisfied with a cattle shed and a manger for bringing him forth into the world.

It often becomes hard for us to associate our celebrations with the lowliness of the manger, to capture the true Spirit of Christmas. Today, ironically, we need the euphoria, the pomp, the glory, the lights and splendid decorations, and even the snow, to celebrate Christmas, the birth of this humble, lowly King. Otherwise, we won't feel that we have celebrated Christmas. The King of Kings, who chose this lowly ambience, wanted it to become a place fit for his birth by the anxious heart beats of Joseph who could not find a place and by the birth pangs of the virgin mother. The warmth of the hearts of the mother and the father made the manger the hearth of the Holy Family to give warmth to the newborn king. Our hearts have to become homes that give warmth of our love to the Savior.

Nine-year-old Wally was in second grade when most children of his age were fourth-graders. He was big for his years, a clumsy fellow, and a slow learner. But Wally was a hopeful, willing, smiling lad, a natural defender of the underdog, and he was well liked by his classmates. His parents encouraged him to audition for the annual parish Christmas play. Wally wanted to be a shepherd. Instead, he was given the role of the innkeeper. The director reasoned that Wally's size would lend extra force to the innkeeper's refusal of lodging to Joseph. During rehearsals, Wally was instructed to be firm with Joseph.

When the play opened, no one was more caught up in the action than Wally. And when Joseph knocked on the door of the inn, Wally was ready. He flung the door open and asked menacingly, “What do you want?” “We seek lodging,” Joseph replied. “Seek it elsewhere,” Wally said in a firm voice. “There’s no room in the inn.” “Please, good innkeeper,” Joseph pleaded. “This is my wife, Mary. She is with child and is very tired. She needs a place to rest.”

Then there came a long pause as Wally looked down at Mary. The prompter quickly whispered Wally’s next line: “No! Be gone!” Wally remained silent. At the silence, the forlorn couple turned and began to slowly move away. Seeing this, Wally’s brow creased with concern. Tears welled up in his eyes. Suddenly, he called out, ***“Don’t go! You can have my room.”***

Christmas asks us a tough question. Do we close the doors of our hearts to Jesus who is looking for a place to be reborn in our lives? Is there any point in being sentimental about the doors being slammed by the folk in Bethlehem, when there is no room in our own hearts for the same Jesus coming in the form of the needy? We need to reverence each human life and to treat others respectfully as the living residences of the incarnate God. To neglect the old, to be contemptuous of the poor and to have no thought for the unemployed and the lonely, the sick and the old, is to ignore those individuals with whom Christ has so closely identified himself. Hence, we all need to examine ourselves daily on the doors we close to Jesus. Is there room? Or is there no room?

Merry Christmas to all of you!

Reading I: Isaiah 62:11-12. Say to daughter Zion, your Savior comes!

Reading II: Titus 3:4-7. But when the kindness and generous love of God our Savior appeared...

Gospel: Luke 2:1-16. So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger.