

HOMILY – CHRISTMAS MASS 2017

The traditional manger scene which we are used to seeing here in our church and in our homes is based upon the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel we just heard proclaimed. In it we find Mary and Joseph who have traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be counted in an imposed government census. Because there was no room in a comfortable inn, Jesus is born in a stable and laid in a manger. Angels appear to shepherds in the fields announcing the savior's birth. We all know that story and find a peaceful comfort in seeing it portrayed.

At Christmas time in 2007, the Vatican did something that turned a lot of heads and raised a lot of questions. It had nothing to do with dogma or moral teachings. It had to do with the Vatican replacing its traditional manger scene with a radically new one. This new approach was inspired by the Gospel account from Saint Matthew.

In Matthew's Gospel, there is no report of Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem. Joseph receives a message from an angel to take Mary as his wife. "He did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus." This is the version, Matthew's version, that the Vatican had chosen that year of 2007 to be its Christmas scene. There was in Saint Peter's square no stable with a donkey and an ox, there were no shepherds and sheep, and there was no baby in a manger. What you would have seen is a baby with his mother in Joseph's house. You would have seen Joseph's carpentry shop where he worked. Adjacent to that shop was a small outdoor patio, and next door a pub in which people are drinking and celebrating around a fireplace.

You can now imagine how much conversation that caused. That change altered centuries of tradition. When asked about this, the Vatican official answered "it was time for a change". There must have been a better reason than that. Why was the move made from Luke's gospel to Matthew's gospel? Why move from a stable to a carpentry shop?

One explanation that makes sense to me is that while the event as narrated by Saint Luke is beautiful and peaceful we celebrate Christmas today in a world that is not so beautiful and peaceful. As exotic and romantic as it may be to picture Jesus surrounded by shepherds and sheep, serenaded by choirs of angels, it is more important to find Jesus where we live, where we work, and yes, at times where we relax with friends and a few drinks. The Gospel of Matthew challenges us to keep in mind that Jesus came into a messy world. He chose to be present to our world – with all of its hustle and activity, with all of its good and bad and with all its hopes and disappointments.

Whether we choose to be comforted by Luke's version of the birth of Jesus or be

challenged by Matthew's account, the important thing to remember is that Jesus came to be among his people.

Jesus always put people first. We must realize that there is nothing more important than the people in our lives. They are so much more important than the money we make, than the work we do, than the comforts we enjoy. There is no more important thing to do than to spend our time with people, to share ourselves and our wisdom with them, to let them know that we love them and are thankful for them. Jesus makes people a priority in all the Gospel accounts. In his great commandment he says that we are called to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We must also turn the other cheek and forgive our enemies. Each one of us carries some resentment, some anger towards someone who has hurt us or disappointed us. We have all the reasons why they are at fault and why it is their responsibility to come and ask for forgiveness. Jesus says we must take the first step to forgive them. We must make the first step toward reconciliation. We do not do this because the person who hurt us deserves it. We do it because it is simply God's way. When Jesus teaches us to pray he says: "Forgive us our trespasses, our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us".

Jesus also chose to be present to the weakest among us. Jesus calls us to care for the unborn, for the poor, for the sick, for the imprisoned. It is not enough for us to say, "Look, I'm taking care of my life and my family; let those people care for themselves." Jesus measures us against the way we care for the most vulnerable and the weak among us. He says, "Whatever you do for the least of those among you, you do for me".

As I said in my Christmas message to the parish, "putting people first, forgiving, caring for the weakest among us, those are Jesus' priorities. If we are to be true followers and disciples of Jesus, they must be our priorities as well." Soon we will take our Christmas lights down, put our Christmas music away, throw away our Christmas gifts' wrappings and wait for our credit card bills to arrive. The most important thing to do after Christmas is to keep the presence of Jesus with us by allowing Jesus to rule our hearts and fill our hearts with love, forgiveness and service to the least among us. Merry Christmas to each one of you and a blessed and hopeful New Year!

Closing Story 12-25-17

There was a Jewish lady named Mrs. Rosenberg and many years ago she was stranded late one night at a fashionable resort – and one that did not admit Jews. The desk clerk looked down at his book and said, "Sorry ma'm there is no room here. The hotel is full." And the Jewish lady said, "But your sign says that you have vacancies."

And the desk clerk stammered and then said curtly, "You know that we do not admit Jews. Now, if you will try the other side of town..." Mrs. Rosenberg stiffened noticeably and said, "I'll have you know I converted to your religion." The desk clerk said, "Oh, yeah? Let me give you a little test. How was Jesus born?" Mrs. Rosenberg replied without hesitation, "He was born to a virgin named Mary in a little town called Bethlehem." "Very good," replied the hotel clerk. "Tell me more." Mrs. Rosenberg replied, "He was born in a manger." "That's right," said the hotel clerk. "And why was he born in a manger?" Mrs. Rosenberg said loudly, "Because a jerk like you in that hotel wouldn't give a Jewish lady a room for the night!"