

CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT
“Nothing Out of the Ordinary”
(Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-16)

What words best describe Christmas? Humble faith? Immense hope? Great joy? Endless Peace? Perhaps all of these? I would like to add two other perhaps shocking words: *Ordinariness* and *Poverty*. These two words convey at a very deep level, the meaning of Christmas.

My brothers and sisters – recognize Jesus in your poverty and ordinariness.

First, Poverty:

Jesus was born into a poor family and in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn. The God who is born into our world is born into a world that has no room for him.

It is still the same today. Our society at this moment is trying to take Christ out of Christmas with “holiday trees” and “happy holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas”. The pace of our own lives can be so busy, that we don’t have time for prayer, worship, confession, perhaps even each other at this time of year. Our priorities get lost and we get distracted and confused.

Because our world is so selfish, sinful, in love with power, wealth and status, Jesus must come into it uninvited. Because Jesus is meek, gentle, forgiving and pure love, just the opposite of what the world wants, he cannot be at home in this world. Yet as God he must be in it, so his place is with the others for whom there is no room – the poor, the discredited, those who are marginalized as persons.

That is a message our culture doesn’t want to hear, but needs to hear. The poor more easily make a place for God in their lives. Their stables and mangers are more available for God’s birth than our hotels, boardrooms, casinos, bingo palaces and extravagant homes filled with our status symbols.

In our lives and in our world, so often, there is no room at the inn, no place to welcome God who wants to be born in it. As it was at the first Christmas, the Christ child today must be born outside our cities, among the poor. So, to find him ourselves, we must let ourselves be led by the poor, the children, our own brokenness and poverty, to the mangers in our world today.

The second reading speaks of “he who will redeem us from our iniquity”. One of the best ways for us to meet Jesus is to do just that - let him redeem us - save us from our sins. We do that best by celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation – going to confession. There we face our poverty, our sin; we name it and share it and receive his transforming forgiveness. That is the best way to prepare for, and even experience, the joy of Christmas personally, as the joy of forgiveness, before we celebrate it at Christmas time ritually and liturgically as we are doing now.

Secondly, Ordinariness:

Christmas is nothing out of the ordinary. After the birth of Christ, we need not look to the extraordinary, the spectacular or the miraculous to find God. God is found where we live – in our kitchens, at our tables, in our wounds, and in each other’s faces.

This is hard to believe and has always been hard to accept. When Jesus was on earth, virtually no one believed that he was the Messiah, precisely because he was so ordinary, so unlike what they imagined God to be. They had expected a superstar, a king, someone who would turn the world rightfully upside down. Preaching meekness, gentleness and unconditional love, Jesus did not live up to those false expectations.

It is interesting that the bible does not tell us what Jesus looked like, nor even if he had any outstanding psychological traits. In terms of appearance, he was too ordinary, not worth describing, nothing out of the ordinary. He looked like everyone else. Even after the resurrection, he is mistaken for a gardener, a cook, a traveler.

Things haven't changed much in two thousand years. Seldom does Jesus meet our expectations today. We are still often looking for him beyond the ordinary, beyond the gardener, the neighbor, the stranger, trying to find a miraculous Christ. We go to places where he might be appearing, or where his mother might be shedding tears, yet we pass by and ignore the tears shed at our own breakfast table. We are intrigued by the wounds of a Padre Pio, yet we fail to pay attentions to the wounds of those we hurt in our own family, or even to our own emotional or moral wounds.

We look for Christ everywhere, except where he is to be found – in the ordinary - right around us, in our families, community and workplaces, in our own healing journeys, where the incarnation took place – in our flesh.

St. John of the Cross puts it this way:

“God has spoken so completely through his own Word that he chooses to add nothing. He spoke partially through the prophets, but has now said everything in Christ. Anyone seeking some new vision or revelation from him would commit an offense, for instead of focusing his eyes entirely on Christ he would desire something other than Christ, or beyond him. Fix your eyes on Christ alone for in him all is revealed and in him you will find more than you could ever ask for or desire.”

The second reading also speaks of “he who would purify for himself a people of his own, zealous for good works.” Jesus came with a two fold mission: to redeem and to sanctify; to save and to heal. He wants not only to save us through forgiveness, but also to heal us through prayer and fellowship. He wants us to be, not just individuals who are forgiven, but a people, his Church, his visible Body here on earth. We need to find him in each other, to believe in each other, to accept each other as we are, with our shortcomings and our gifts, to assemble together for worship as his people, and to serve him in each other. Then we will be able to truly celebrate Christmas.

Jean Vanier, son of the former Governor General of Canada, is someone who understands this mystery of finding God in the ordinary. Leaving behind a profession as a military officer and a professor of law, he invited two mentally challenged men to live with him in his own home, to form community with them. To his surprise, in doing so he experienced Christ in profound ways. That was the beginning of the L'Arche movement that today provides homes rather than institutions for the mentally challenged. Those who volunteer or work there, also find Christ in surprising ways.

My mother had Alzheimer's disease for years before she died. She did not know who I was. I would relate to her by feeding her. I needed her poverty, her brokenness, because I was too busy, too efficient. To relate to her I had to slow down and feed her, and there I found Christ – feeding my own mother and getting in touch with my own mortality.

Joining the 12 Step movement of AA was another turning point for me. I learned as much or even more about life, about myself and about God there than I did in a theological college. I learned to face my own demons, to deal with my defects of character and my own addictions. In sharing my own brokenness with others in a powerful fellowship, I experienced healing and met Jesus there. Now, I find Christ not so much in being bishop and dealing with administration, but rather in journeying with people who are dealing with their abuse and their brokenness, and finding healing.

Sixty eight percent of our diocese is made up of First Nations people, who are often seen as second class and marginalized. I address you now as a nation. Who are you in the eyes of the world? Who are you in your own eyes? There seems to be among many of you a sense of low self-worth; a belief that someone from the outside is better somehow than one of your own. Yet in the eyes of Christ you are kings, sons and daughters of God. Believe in yourselves, accept yourselves as you are, in all your brokenness and poverty and marginalization, and you will experience the peace of Christ.

Love is a thing that happens in ordinary places – in kitchens, at tables, in bedrooms, in workplaces, in families, in the flesh. God abides in us when we also abide there. Through the Incarnation, God crawls into ordinary life and invites us to meet him there, in our own poverty and the poverty of those around us.

The Eucharist we celebrate tonight is another powerful hint at this mystery – Christ is found in the poor and the ordinary. These poor, ordinary gifts of bread and wine will be transformed, through the prayer and faith of the presider and the community, into the Body and Blood of Christ. If we receive them with repentant, humble faith, then we are transformed into the Body of Christ, sent to be light to the world.

So, may our faith and our celebration of Christ's birth tonight, help us to recognize and experience Christ who is born into our poverty and our ordinariness. Christmas is about being poor enough to recognize our need for Jesus, and nothing out of the ordinary.

May God bless us all with his forgiveness and healing; his peace and joy, this Christmas and throughout the New Year.