

CHRISTMAS 2009

(Fr. Jerry Kopacek)

5:15, 7:30 pm: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel.”

Midnight: “For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.”

8 am: “So [the shepherds] went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger.”

10 am: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

These words from the gospel highlight this most important birthday the world has ever known: the birth of Jesus, son of Mary but also the Son of God; the fully human and fully divine, united in that one little baby boy born in Bethlehem so many years ago. What a joy and privilege it is for us to celebrate this Christmas Mass together! I certainly want to wish all of you and your loved ones a truly blessed and merry Christmas, and to extend a special and warm welcome to all our out-of-town visitors who are with us.

No matter how old and wise we become—if we take seriously the fact that Christmas is all about the birth of Jesus the Christ, it is hard not to be in awe and wonder. Remember what we are talking about here: God the Son, second Person of the Most Holy Trinity and co-eternal with the Father, became one of us flesh-and-blood human creatures. This is the heart of our belief in the Incarnation—God became man in the womb of Mary; the God of infinite power and majesty becomes a little baby, just as helpless and needy as every other baby ever born.

In our Advent Lessons and Carols program earlier this month, there was one song that caught my special attention for a number of reasons, one of which was simply the title itself: “A Baby Changes Everything.” Now, you parents out there, especially you first-time parents, may be thinking: “yes, a baby certainly does change everything—tell me something I don’t know!” That little bundle of joy opens the parents’ eyes to a whole new world of responsibility and a never-ending learning process. That baby, who becomes a toddler, who becomes a pre-teen, who becomes an adolescent will be the source of constant amazement, wonder, joy... and perhaps also the source of occasional frustration or exasperation. At least, that’s what I’ve been told... And even when the child becomes an adult, you as parent never stop being parent. That baby of yours, no matter what age he or she is, changes everything in your life—he or she is always a focus of concern, worry, joy and love (sometimes all at that same time!).

A baby changes everything not just for the parents, but also for those brothers and sisters already on the scene who may not be too sure how thrilled they are with this new addition to the family. One little girl was asked how she like her new baby brother. She shrugged and said: “oh, he’s alright, but there were a lot of things we needed worse.” Then there is the Sunday school teacher who asked her class: “what can we do for God? He has done so much for us—he gave us his Son.” One little girl piped up: “I’ll give him my baby brother.” Those baby brothers are really taking it on the chin, aren’t they??

A baby changes everything. Can we ever begin to fathom how much and how intensely that was true for Mary and Joseph? For Mary, that song expresses so well what she experienced: “Teen-age girl, much too young; unprepared for what’s to come. Not a ring on her hand. All her dreams and all her plans. A baby changes everything.” Mary was truly holy and sincerely desired to be God’s obedient servant—but to have a baby, conceived by the Holy Spirit, who would be Savior of all? No wonder Mary had some questions for the angel Gabriel. Joseph was a holy and righteous man who was engaged to Mary. But then he learned she was already pregnant before they even had a chance to live together as husband and wife. It took another angel’s message (this time, in Joseph’s dream) to encourage him to take Mary as his wife and later to become the head of the Holy Family. For both Mary and Joseph, a baby changed everything for them.

Think of the impact that this baby born in a Bethlehem stable would have on others of his time. He grew up and began to preach to the people about the kingdom of God and how Jesus himself was the one way to his Father in heaven. He called twelve very ordinary men to be his inner circle, those to whom he would entrust his message and the sacraments and upon whom he would build his Church. For the apostles, this man-God turned their lives upside-down and changed everything for and about them—especially after his death and resurrection and his gift to them of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. They spent the rest of their lives preaching the good news of the risen Christ, and nearly all of them suffered a martyr's death for their efforts. For those apostles and for those others who were among the first to hear and embrace the gospel, a baby changed everything.

And in the last 2000 years, it is impossible to overestimate the impact of that baby born of Mary. The gospel spread gradually and more widely throughout the world over the years and centuries—despite the efforts of some to destroy the Christian faith and life, and despite the scandals all too often caused by Christians who did not live up to Jesus' call to holiness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran theologian who ran afoul of Hitler's Third Reich; in fact, he was killed in one of those hellish concentration camps near the end of World War II. In one of his writings Bonhoeffer referred to this incomprehensible truth: "the birth of a child is supposed to lead to the great turning point of all things and to bring the salvation and redemption of all humanity." What the greatest intellects and most powerful rulers could not do, "...that no happens through a newborn child." Indeed, a baby changes everything.

Important and true as this is on the worldwide and historical scale, however, we cannot leave the impact of that baby at that level. We live in a world in which war and other violence, economic hardship, illness and all other kinds of suffering seem to reign supreme. It is so easy to look at it all and think: "it's always been this way, it will never change." Indeed, many respond with a sense of resignation, sadness, perhaps even despair. We also live in a culture that tempts us in ever-increasing ways to sin through selfishness, self-gratification, and a refusal to accept responsibility for our own faults and failings.

But this Jesus who was born this (night)(day) nearly twenty centuries ago came to earth not only as Savior but also as the Lord of each of our individual and personal lives on this earth. He is the One who is our hope and the one sure way to ultimate meaning and eternal joy in heaven as we carry our unavoidable crosses in this earthly life. And Jesus is also the one who continues to call and challenge us to ongoing conversion, growth in holiness and fidelity in discipleship. The birth of Jesus in this world and our knowledge of him and of what he came for calls every single one of us to a decision: am I with Jesus, or am I not? Am I mindful of him and of his call to imitate him every day (and not just at Christmas), or am I not? We cannot sit on the fence; we cannot pretend that our actions, attitudes and beliefs do not matter or that we can go on our merry way heedless of who made us and for what he made us. All of this—because Jesus, the Son of God, became man. The eternal Word of the Father became flesh, and he dwelled among us. Jesus was born of Mary as a baby. And remember: a baby changes everything. This baby changes everything—he changes everything, everywhere, and for everyone. And the change is forever.