

CHRISTMAS – 2008
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

What a joy and a privilege it is for me to celebrate with you once again this great feast of the birth of Jesus our Savior! It has become a cliché to say that time seems to go by faster every year, but a benefit of that is that the joy of Christmas arrives each year in that same way. I certainly want to wish all of you a truly blessed and a very merry Christmas as you gather with family and loved ones to rejoice in that sacred birth in Bethlehem. A special welcome and best wishes also to all our guests and visitors from out of town--I'm very glad you are with us.

I imagine the youngsters are excited to see what magic Santa has been able to bring about this year; I just hope they got their letters to him written on time. It's always a delight reading children's letters to Santa Claus. One that I came across a few years ago was more than a little interesting: "Dear Santa Claus, My name is Robert. I am 6 years old. I want a rifle, a pistol, a machine gun, bullets, a hand grenade, dynamite, and tear gas. I am planning a surprise for my big brother." To say the least... Another little guy (named Randy) tried to bring in the bargaining concept: "Dear Santa--I said a prayer for you and I will say another if I get the fire truck." You scratch Santa's back, and Santa will scratch yours!

In fact, I think there's a bit of Randy in all of us. How many of us have tried to bargain or make promises with God if something goes our way? And if it does, do we remember those promises and fulfill them? One example comes to my mind: I was on our high school debate team, and one year we were getting ready for a tournament to be held at Iowa State (that very fine institution). I remember actually praying something like this: "God, if you help us do well at that tournament, I'll be really, really nice to my sister." (She and I seemed to have more than our usual share of squabbles at that time...). Well, we went to that tournament, we had a lot of fun, and we actually won first place in our division! It was the highlight of my debate career, we were very excited as we got to show off our trophy back at school in Britt. Then I remembered that promise I made to God...I'd like to say I never, ever squabbled with my sister again, but I'm afraid that would not be entirely accurate.

Unfortunately, that's the way we so often are. We have good intentions, we make promises, but we don't always fulfill them--even in our relationship with God. Fortunately, that's not the case with God. Scripture and salvation history are filled with promises that God made to his people--not only promises he made, but fulfilled as well. Remember God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations? Abraham and his wife Sarah were way beyond the normal child-bearing years, yet God fulfilled his promise through their son Isaac. Remember God's promise to Moses that he would help him lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt? Against seemingly impossible odds, God did just that--even to the point of leading them through the Red Sea while holding pharaoh's army back with a pillar of fire.

This Christmas feast is all about celebrating the fact that God fulfilled the most important promise he ever made--his promise to redeem us and send us a Savior, one who would heal the wounds and divisions brought on by human sin, and who would make possible for us eternal joy with God in heaven. We hear examples of those promises in our Christmas scripture readings:

[5 and 7:30 pm: in the 2d reading, Paul in his preaching said "From [David's] descendants God, according to his promise, had brought to Israel a savior, Jesus." And in the gospel, Matthew reminds us that the Virgin Mary's giving birth to Jesus fulfilled the promise God made through Isaiah that 'the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.'] **PROMISES MADE BY GOD; PROMISES FULFILLED IN THE BIRTH OF JESUS.**

[midnight: God speaking through the prophet Isaiah who wrote some 700 years B.C., said 'a

child is born to us, a son is given us...they name him Wonder Counselor...Prince of Peace.']
PROMISES MADE BY GOD; PROMISES FULFILLED IN THE BIRTH OF JESUS.

[8 a.m.: God speaking through the prophet Isaiah who wrote some 700 years B.C., said "See, the Lord proclaims to the ends of the earth...your savior comes!" Indeed he came, in that baby born in Bethlehem whom the angels and shepherds adored.] PROMISES MADE BY GOD; PROMISES FULFILLED IN BIRTH OF JESUS.

[10 a.m.: God speaking through the prophet Isaiah who wrote some 700 years B.C., said "the Lord comforts his people, he redeems Jerusalem...all the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God." And so it happened--Jesus the redeemer was born, and his name and his gospel have been taken to all the ends of the earth.]
PROMISES MADE BY GOD; PROMISES FULFILLED IN THE BIRTH OF JESUS.

God promised mankind a Savior, and God is good for his word--he fulfills his promises. But this is not just about past events--Jesus' birth in a manger over 2000 years ago, although that is our special joy on Christmas. God continues to promise us his help, presence, grace and strength in this life. And just as God fulfilled his promises to give us his Son as our Savior, he fulfills the promises he makes to us in this time and in this place. That is fundamentally important for us to remember. We may struggle with any number of crosses--financial difficulties, illness, broken relationships, the death of a loved one...and we may wonder "God, where are you? Didn't you promise to help me?"

Let me tell you a true story of someone who came to understand how true it is that the Lord fulfills his promises. Every year in December, Our Sunday Visitor (a national Catholic weekly) prints what readers describe as their most memorable Christmas; this year's collection contained this story of a 26-year-old man serving a life sentence in a Texas maximum-security prison. He writes: "The most meaningful Christmas of my life was during the very worst time of my life. It was December 2000 and I was 18 years old, staring ...[at] a possible death sentence as a result of a yearlong crime spree that had culminated in my taking the life of another... I was a mess. In a blind effort to find some sort of meaning, I took to reading the Bible...

"Late at night on Christmas Eve, I lay in my cell deep in thought pondering my possible future. I realized there was nothing I could do to help myself. I might even wind up strapped up to a table with a deadly mixture of drugs entering my veins. In a deep and sincere prayer I told Jesus that I had nothing to offer him for his 2000th birthday, but if he would accept, he could have myself to do with as he pleased. A total surrender. At that instant I was filled with such a profound sense of peace and calm that I just knew that everything would be OK. I could almost hear a chorus of angels singing. Since then, my life and outlook have been completely transformed. I was eventually spared the death penalty. And although life in a maximum-security prison is not pleasant, I accept it as my due. But since that night eight years ago, through all the difficulties of prison life, Jesus has been with me, calmly giving me hope and the reassurance that everything will be all right."

Jesus once said "Come to me, all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest." This young man in Texas, who is paying his debt to society and who is facing a tougher situation than any of us are ever likely to face, knows that God fulfills his promises through his Son Jesus. That fulfillment of divine promises began at Bethlehem--that's why we celebrate this Christmas feast with such great joy and thanksgiving. That fulfillment of divine promises can and does continue today for each of us--to the extent that we make that same total surrender to Jesus.

One of the songs that was sung at our Advent Lessons and Carols program expressed this so beautifully. It's called "The Promise", and it goes in part like this: "The Promises are many, the Promises are one. The Promises are Jesus Christ. The Promises have come. The Promise is great blessing. The Promise

is great wealth. The Promise is Eternal Life. The Promise is Himself. O come embrace the Promise! O come and live the joy! O come and love the Living Christ, Sweet Mary's little boy!" Maybe we aren't always fully faithful to the promises we make--whether about debate tournaments or anything else. Thanks be to God for the fact that he is always and everywhere faithful to his promises to us--a faithfulness that we celebrate on this most holy night/day. Rejoice always in the truth that this newborn Christ is the promise that is eternal life, the promise that is Himself.