

CHRISTMAS 2009 ABC

(Isaiah 9:1-6; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14)

THE WORD IS THE DIVINE DONATION: MUSIC TO OUR EARS

In preparation for Christmas, the Religion teacher told her first graders to write on small slips of paper the kind of gift they thought the Infant Jesus would like to have and could use. She asked the kids to drop these slips in a beautifully decorated box which she would place near the crib in the church at Christmas. Somehow the children misunderstood. Instead of putting the name of the gift, they actually put in the gift itself. The boys and girls were ingenious in coming up with small items that could fit in the box. The teacher did not supervise the box very carefully. But just before Christmas, she peeked in and here is some of what she saw: a jar of baby food, a small doll, a toy truck, a tiny pair of mittens, and a disposable diaper!

The children's gifts highlight for us that God really did become human in the mystery of the Incarnation and so he needed the things the kids gave him. He who was the greatest gift put himself in the position of receiving gifts to enable him to live as a helpless baby.

God's gift of his Son as the Christ Child has inspired countless acts of gift-giving and donations throughout Christian and human history since Mary gave birth. A couple years after my ordination as Christmas approached, the pastor of my home parish of Immaculate Conception in Clintonville told me of a street person who had taken up residence on their church porch. It's a big and very beautiful porch and I suppose the homeless man saw that it would provide some protection against the cold. This pastor was Fr. Jim Smith who is now at St. Matthias. Eventually Fr. Smith left the church unlocked so that the guy could slip inside on the cold nights of December. Eventually the gentleman found more permanent lodging and moved on. But the gift that he received from a kindly pastor was in keeping with this Season when we celebrate the great story of St. Luke's Gospel which we just heard – the story of a poor family that had to stay in a stable on the night they welcomed their new born son.

Not too long after that Christmas, Immaculate Conception in the year 1989 celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its church building which was constructed during the Great Depression. Fr. Smith asked the people to give to a fund that would 100% be given to the poor. Many of the folks knew about the street person who had taken shelter on their church porch. And perhaps they were so generous to this collection because that porch had been the gateway to so many graces for them and their families. I too recalled all the good that had happened to me through that holy portal. It was on this porch that I and about fifty other kids posed with our pastor in May of 1951 for our First Communion picture. The procession for my First Mass paused on the porch before we continued into the church. I baptized one of my nephews near the doors of that structure – on the same spot where two of my siblings also were dipped into those holy waters. Both my Dad and Mom made their final journeys into the church they loved as their pallbearers bore their caskets across that porch. Fr. Smith told me he raised \$125,000 in 1989 from those, including my parents, who appreciated their worship space and its porch. I did a little research and informed Fr. Smith that Immaculate Conception Church had coincidentally cost exactly \$125,000 to build in the 1930s!

The church building is a symbol of Christ from whom grace in abundance flows to all of us. And Mary was the porch through which this gift was brought into the home of the world's hearts. It was Jesus of Nazareth who by his Cross and Resurrection made it possible for us to imitate his example of generous and sacrificial giving and thus to live a life worth living and a life worth offering up to the Father. Christmas is a great day for children, but Christmas is also very much and above all an adult celebration. Only a mature Christian can even begin to comprehend what the Nativity is all about. This Birth inexorably leads to the Crucifixion where the soldier's lance into Jesus' side unleashes the graces that make us holy. And Bethlehem inexorably leads to the Resurrection which is the promise of eternal life. There is an ancient saying: "The wood of the crib is the wood of the cross." Jesus was born to die for our sins. This is what Christmas is all about.

And so this is what Easter is all about too. At the Easter Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday night, the deacon sings the proclamation of Jesus' Resurrection in the hymn called the Exsultet, a song so old that no one knows who wrote it. Undoubtedly the most famous line in the Exsultet is this: "O Happy Fault, O truly necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer." These words imply that the human race is better off after we sinned than before – not because of the sin, of course, but because of the remedy which is God's gracious gift of his Son to be our savior. This gift arrived on Christmas wrapped in swaddling clothes. (Or was that wrapped in a Pamper?)

I once read a kind of parable about Creation and what God decided to do when humanity messed it up. I have abbreviated this story and added some stuff of my own. The parable pictures God as the Great Conductor of a Grand Orchestra playing a magnificent symphony. In this symphony, the trumpets begin by signaling the retreat of darkness and the appearance of the light. Then the violins and violas painted blue the vault of the earth's ceiling that we call the sky. Next the trombones coax the appearance of dry land. The clarinets define the great lights in the heavens: sun, moon, stars. The flutes and the piccolos, not to be outdone, come in on cue from the Great Director and they announce softly the flashing of the fishes of the sea and the birds of the air. In a crescendo, the drums and the bass fiddles prodded the large animals to begin roaming the land. Finally, there is a brief pause in the music as the Conductor actually creates on the spot a new and unique instrument that is a projection of his own life and love. This instrument is humanity itself – man and woman – and it is the perfect completion of the symphony. All goes well for a long, long time after that, the music perfect in every way. Then, tragically, all of the sudden, even as the orchestra was working in complete harmony, a false note sounded. The Great Conductor stopped the music to see where this sour sound came from. He looked intently and, much to his disbelief, it was humankind who was the culprit.

Then God had a choice. He could have simply scrapped the whole score, disbanded the orchestra, and destroyed it. But his goodness prevented this option. So he chose the alternative. In his brilliance, the Great Conductor immediately devised another plan. He reached out for that false note and held it up to the orchestra, telling them how deeply heartsick he was because of it. But then he declared that, far from destroying the ensemble, he would take that note, purify it, and build a whole new symphony around it. He would rewrite the music to fit the note. He would make up for their terrible mistake and develop another beautiful melody. So that is what God did. The Great Conductor rewrote the score and

produced a new masterpiece, a new symphony that was actually better than the first one because of the gentle cadences and sweet harmony which flowed from the Director's passionate and loving heart.

And the first movement of that new masterpiece is called Christmas.

Yes, the disastrous false note of our sins ruined the original work. But God wrestled with our falseness and made it something new, much the way a potter starts over (and our God is good at working in clay too!) He did not weave sin into his new score, of course, but rather he created a piece with the theme of a new beginning – a second chance. The new Adam, Christ his Son, would be the center of this new creation, this new song of praise. Christ strikes the notes of kindness, mercy, forgiveness, harmony, and reconciliation. Sometimes we might feel like protesting that we are unworthy instruments, we are false notes; but the Great Conductor will hear none of it. He goes on directing. Instead of emptying out the whole orchestra and destroying it, God emptied himself and became a helpless baby in a crib in a cold stable. And when he grew up, that baby boy showed the world an entirely new musical pattern of forgiveness and love.

And so this is why we rejoice tonight. This is why children are excited to give gifts to the baby Jesus, like the kid who dropped the Pamper into the box. This is why adults across the centuries, at Christmas and all year, have given shelter to the homeless and food to the hungry and gifts big and small to the needy and to churches and other charities. This is why folks of all ages unlock their hearts, especially during this Season, and invite Jesus in off the porch. This is why all Christians rejoice with songs of praise. This is why we sing tonight the opening lines of that great first movement of the new and eternal symphony, the movement we call Christmas – namely, these lines: “Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth!” And this is why we will want to keep singing and playing right through the last movement of the Great Conductor's incomparable piece – the movement known as the Resurrection and the Life Everlasting!