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The birth of Jesus influences the way we live

by Thomas Gumbleton

Probably all of us realize that there are three separate liturgies for Christmas with three separate sets of readings: the one that we use during the night, the one that is taken from Luke's Gospel and recounts those events that happened in Bethlehem of Judea, and then there's the one that we call the Celebration of the Shepherd's Mass. It is usually celebrated at dawn, and that is where we hear about Mary reflecting on all these things in her heart, trying to get some sense of what was happening. Finally, we have these readings from the Mass of Christmas Day.

I think of those three sets of readings, that this set proclaims to us in the most clear and yet profoundly mysterious way what we celebrate, the mystery which we really cannot put into words adequately, that somehow God, the supreme and ultimate, infinite being, ^{Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)} ^{Mass during the Day} enters into human history and becomes one like us in every way except sin. It's ^{Isaiah 52:7-10} ^{Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6} ^{Hebrews 1:1-6} the beginning lesson. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God, and the Word was with God." We start off not as in Luke's Gospel, all about the birth of Jesus. We go into eternity to try to reflect on God in God's three persons in that second verse. It is the Word of God, and when that Word speaks, something happens. God speaks and the world is created. All of creation comes into being. That Word of God is God, as John proclaims. We need in a sense to put ourselves in the spirit of awe at God. In the Old Testament, in the Book of Exodus, we get a sense of how the chosen people reacted and related to God with this profound sense of awe and unworthiness.

When Moses has that experience of God appearing in the burning bush, we hear this. The angel of God appeared to Moses by means of a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. ^{Full text of the readings} ^{Moses saw that although the bush} was on fire, it did not burn up. Moses thought, "I will go and see this amazing sight. Why is the bush not burning up?" Yahweh saw that Moses was drawing near to look and God called to him from the middle of the bush, "Moses. Moses." He replied, "Here I am." God said, "Do not come near. Take off your sandals

because the place where you are standing is holy ground."

It's an awesome, extraordinary, unbelievable thing to come into the presence of God. That's what Moses experienced. In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, when Isaiah recounts his own conversion and his own call to be the prophet, he has this extraordinary experience. "At the sound of the voices of angels, the threshold of the temple was filled with smoke. I said, 'Poor me. I am doomed. I am a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips, and yet I have seen God.'"

Isaiah is overwhelmed by the experience of being in a profound way in the presence of God. To begin to really get a sense of what we celebrate in the mystery of the Incarnation, let's start at that point, awareness of how God is totally and utterly different from us. God is beyond us, transcendent. We can't use the same words to describe God and to describe ourselves. God is totally, utterly different, beyond us, and yet -- and this is the mystery of the Incarnation as John says in the Gospel -- that God, the Word of God who was with God at the beginning in all eternity, the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory of the only Son of God.

So as we hear in the letter to the Hebrews, God who spoke to us in so many different ways now speaks to us through God's own Son. God has spoken through creation. God has spoken through our own life experiences. God speaks to us in many ways, but now into our presence comes the very person of God in Jesus. Again, this is a mystery that is beyond our ability to really ever understand, when this one person is the fullness of God in full humanness, the Son of God and now the son of Mary.

As we try to reflect on all that this means, we must begin -- and each year at Christmas, we try to renew this effort for ourselves -- to begin to listen to Jesus, to watch Jesus as He grows up, as He begins His public life, to follow Jesus. In the Gospel of Saint Luke, which is the Gospel that is proclaimed at Mass during the night, it's the Gospel that we're all familiar with, that Gospel where Mary and Joseph, going to Bethlehem at the behest of the emperor, find themselves without a home, having to live in a cave, and then suddenly Jesus is born. He comes into our midst.

We know that story very well, but we need to dwell on it to discover what are the priorities, what are the values, the important things that this Word of God is speaking to us as the Word of God comes into our history and becomes one of us, enters into human history and transforms human history? If you look into the account of St. Luke, there are some things that become very apparent very quickly. First of all, where does Jesus, the Son of God, choose to be born? It is among the poorest of the poor.

We hear sometimes about how God has a preferential option for the poor. We hear that and see that as Jesus is born, because He is born without any material wealth, not even a home. He's born in the back of a cave where the animals usually stay. He's placed in a manger, an instrument that holds the hay that the animals would eat. Jesus is utterly poor and reaches out to the poor, identifies with the poor.

We live in a world where there are now terrible economic difficulties. Many more people are suffering, and beyond our own country there is an overwhelming number of people in our world who are utterly, desperately, absolutely poor. That's where Jesus is most of all. If we want to unite with Jesus, we have to begin to connect with the poor in our world, and share with the poor as Jesus did. Also, there is something else in this story about Jesus, the Word of God coming into our world that really connects with what is happening in our world right now.

Jesus very quickly was a refugee. He was oppressed by the king, Herod, threatened with death, and He has to flee for His life. So He leaves His own country to go to Egypt. He's a refugee, an immigrant. So when we look in our world, we must look where refugees and immigrants are. How do we reach out to them if we understand that it's Jesus sharing that experience, that lot in life? I think maybe our attitudes

would be quite different from what you hear expressed quite often in our country.

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Reject them, push them away -- you're pushing Jesus away if you do that. That's what the Gospel tells us. Then also, finally, in that Gospel story from Matthew and Luke, there is one other thing that I think connects with what is happening in our world. Jesus shows us a kind of inclusivity in the story of the Magi. Those people from the East would actually be where the country of Iran is now, Persia. They came. They were not connected with the chosen people. They were Gentiles, and yet, they're drawn in.

They become part of the people of God. We, it seems, so often want to push people away instead of welcoming Muslims and Jews, and people of any religion or any race. They're all part now of the one same human family, sons and daughters of God as we are. That's what Jesus teaches us at His birth. So, if we really reflect on this coming of God into our world, it can have profound influence on our attitudes, our values and the way we live.

So this morning, as we celebrate this feast of the coming of the Word of God into human history, we feel great joy because God has become one of us. We are united with God. We share in the divinity of God, but then not only do we experience the joy and give thanks, we commit ourselves to live like God, who comes into our midst to become one of us.

[Homily given at St. Hilary Church, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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