

The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas), Yr. A
December 25, 2016
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Around this time of year you see and hear the slogan, “Keep Christ in Christmas”. You may even have it on your car. We remind ourselves because Christmas is used for so many other purposes-- to sell things, as an excuse to party, as therapy for Seasonal Affective Disorder. Well, I'm only guessing that people are fighting the long darkness blues when they light up their shrubs with colored lights right after Halloween.

And these other purposes are okay as long as they don't displace the real purpose of the holiday. (Did you know that our word “holiday” comes from Old English words meaning “holy day”? Don't tell the guards. They will ban “Happy Holidays” along with “Merry Christmas”.)

The real purpose of Christmas is Christ. He's right there in the word! Specifically Christmas celebrates his birth, but someone's birthday is the day we celebrate the person, the simple fact that they exist. Dad used to tell us that on our birthdays we should give mom a present, since she harbored us for nine months and then gave us birth. We still got birthday presents. He said things like that just to make us stop and think, and maybe scare us a little.

True, life is transmitted to us by our parents, so we owe them; and, sure, we exist for nine months before we are born; but for some reason a person's birthday is the day to celebrate the person, that they exist, who they are, the difference they make in this world.

Likewise on Christmas: we may remember that Jesus began to exist when Mary accepted the invitation of Gabriel to be the Mother of God, and we rightly celebrate her courage in taking on whatever that extraordinary vocation might bring. But on Jesus' birthday we honor him, the eternal Son of God, the Word through whom the Father created all things, including human beings in God's own image.

At creation God imprinted His image in us, which gives us a capacity for God, a longing to be completed in God. In a further, special act of creation, when Mary gave her consent, God entered that image, inhabited it, and completed it. The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us, our human brother.

Because Jesus is God living a human life, He is also a human being fully alive with divine life; born in time so that we, through him, might live forever. We need to tap into the life he has, the life he offers. As he said, “I am the true bread come down from heaven to give life to the world.” Interesting that Emmanuel-- God with us-- the bread come down from heaven, was born in Bethlehem.

(Did you know the name “Bethlehem” in the Hebrew original means “House of Bread”?)

So, how to attach ourselves to Jesus and draw from him his divine life, like branches drawing life from the vine, or like drawing life from the nourishing bread we eat ?

The name of our holy day gives us a clue. We say “Keep Christ in Christmas”. We could also say “Keep Mass in Christmas”. Yes! The word “Christmas” is a combination of “Christ” and “Mass”.

Just as Candlemas is the day when we celebrate the Mass of blessed candles, also known as the Feast of the Presentation; and Michaelmas is the Feast of St. Michael; so Christmas is the day on which we celebrate the Mass of Christ.

But, you may say, isn't every Mass about Christ? Well, yes-- and how nice that you noticed! Every Mass is a flesh and blood encounter with God who humbled himself to share our flesh and blood. The Creator of humanity entered into the whole human experience-- conception, gestation, birth, the vulnerability of childhood, the responsibility of adulthood, the quest for truth and justice, the suffering that happens when love confronts evil, death – God entered into our whole human experience and redeemed everything he touched. God made himself incarnate so that we who attach ourselves to him might become what he became by his incarnation-- a human being fully alive with divine life.

And so we gather, Sunday after Sunday, or even daily. We hear the good news in the Scriptures, we give bread and wine to the priest, and by the Lord's own words of consecration God speaks His creative Word into the bread and wine, as once He spoke it into the womb of Mary. He makes His incarnate self present in an incarnate way under appearance of bread and wine.

He who dwelt nine months in the tabernacle of Mary's womb dwells in this tabernacle behind the altar. He who was laid in the manger for shepherds to behold is laid on this altar for our adoration. He who gave himself to his disciples at the Last Supper under appearance of bread and wine, who gave himself to the Father's will in Gethsemane, who consummated his self-offering on Golgotha gives himself to us to be consumed. His divine humanity is absorbed by our own so that we might become through him what he became by his incarnation – human beings fully alive with divine life.

This is the true purpose of this day; the reason for the gift giving, the parties, the cheerful lights shining in the darkness. Happy Holy Day to one and all! A Merry Christ Mass!