

The meaning of Christmas
(A sermon for Christmas Eve, 2006)

What is the meaning of Christmas? For the past several weeks we have all heard – in one variant or another – the answer to that question. Some will tell you that the meaning of Christmas is to be found in buying the perfect gift. Some will tell you that the meaning of Christmas is to be found in the right table setting or a festive meal. Some find the true meaning of Christmas in watching another Rita MacNeil Christmas special on TV, or seeing the latest Santa Claus movie. Others will tell you that the meaning of Christmas is to be found in doing good for others – as if we needed a special holiday to be decent people!



Well, I suspect that the answer depends on who you are, and where you are. The story of Christ's birth as told to us in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew relate a story rich in meaning and relevance for a wide spectrum of human activity in all times and places.

The Church has always had its own proclamation of the *meaning of Christmas* - a proclamation of peace, sacredness of life, of salvation, justice, truth for all peoples of every time and place.

The Church's message has often been lost among the jingle of countless cash registers and the cacophony of mediocre pop singers warbling off-key carols. The meaning of Christmas seems to have been hijacked by mass culture and the demands of the market place. I am reminded of a cartoon in *New Yorker* magazine: a well dressed couple, carrying shopping bags bulging with Christmas presents is walking by a church which has a nativity scene outside by the front door. Looking at the portrayal of the manger and the Christ child, the woman says "that's just too much! Now even the Church wants to get in on Christmas!"

So, what has the Church got to say about the *meaning of Christmas*? The Church – and the Gospel story of Christ's birth – *does* have a lot to say to a lot of people today. Here is the *meaning of Christmas* for some people, in the old, familiar Bible story – *and for people today!*

For families, the *meaning of Christmas* may be found in the assurance of God's love even in the worst of situations. Remember, the story of the Holy Family is not a story of an ideal family – it starts with a scandal of an engagement seemingly betrayed, a potentially illegitimate child, a wronged man seeking divorce from his fiancée. But it ends in love conquering scandal and finding sacredness in the birth of that child even in miserable surroundings. Later, that family would have difficulty in understanding their teen-age son, and the last act of the son was to provide care for his widowed mother. The story of that family is full of

difficulties and pain – but God used that family to bring His holiness into the world. For families – especially those experiencing the pain of broken relationships, poverty or despair, the *meaning of Christmas* is found in God’s loving presence, which brings His holiness even through the worst times.

For people toiling away at their daily jobs, underpaid and under-appreciated, for the working poor, for the vast majority who struggle to pay the bills and hope not to get laid-off because of some corporate global strategy, *the meaning of Christmas* may be found in the astonishment of the shepherds, to whom God announced a message of hope and blessing. All throughout the Gospel story, all throughout the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, God chose the lowly of the earth to be the one’s to whom the Good News was proclaimed. To them – the shepherd, the minimum wage earning cleaning-lady, the kid at the check-out counter and the factory worker, the *meaning of Christmas* is found in God’s affirmation of their worth and dignity, even if their bosses do not recognize it.

For the intellectuals of our world, the thinkers, planners and pundits, schemers and scholars – the *meaning of Christmas* is found in its startling reminder that all that thinking, studying, planning and wisdom – all those graduate school degrees – may lead you to the wrong place anyway! The wise men from the east – the intellectuals of their day – relied on their own knowledge, their own abilities to discern the meaning of events. They thought they knew it all! Yet they wandered into the wrong place – the wrong *palace!* . They found the right place only after they

realized that they had been wrong and that their theories about the order of the world. They realized that true power and majesty may not be found in palaces, but in the everyday occurrences of life and in their power to amaze and move our hearts and minds.

The *meaning of Christmas* for the movers and shakers of this world is quite disturbing. The Christmas story begins with a tax-grab by the Roman emperor Augustus – a census to make sure that he knew where everybody was and how much they were worth. The story continues with the duplicity and bloodthirstiness of the maniacal despot Herod. And, ultimately, the story ends with the might of the Jerusalem mob and the Roman government exercising its authority of life and death over Jesus. But all the attempts by all these powerful people ultimately fail. It wasn't the words of the emperor Augustus' decree that we remember, but the words of Jesus, who said *Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the earth*. The other rulers in this story survive only as footnotes to futility and to the failure of political power to control and extinguish truth. *The meaning of Christmas* for the rulers of this world is truly very disturbing: it reminds them of the futility and frailty of their power and shows them the real power of truth and justice.

And for the young – those young in years and young of heart – the *meaning of Christmas* is found in the life of that baby in Bethlehem. Jesus of Nazareth grew up to be the ultimate radical, the ideal of radical thinkers throughout the two thousand years of Christianity, and a model for even non-believing radical thinkers. He owned no property,

save for a coat. He wrote nothing that we know of. He had lots of admirers among the poor and powerless, a great many enemies among the rich and powerful, and a few close friends, but even they abandoned him in the end. He was convinced of his mission, but troubled by occasional severe doubts. He was killed by his opponents and, by this world's standards, was a failure. But, the *meaning of His birth – the meaning of Christmas* – is in the astounding truth that *the birth of every child* is the potential birth of a new world, *the meaning of Christmas* is in the realization that *every child* that comes into this world can be the instrument of God's love and grace – even, as John wrote in His Gospel about Jesus: *his own people did not accept him. The meaning of Christmas* to the those who do the new and unexpected, who think of that which is yet to be – to those whom the rest of society labels as *radicals* – for them – and for us – the *meaning of Christmas* is encouragement (being “in the heart”) to say the words of truth, for they may be the words of God; and to do the works of mercy and justice, for they may be the works of God.

So, *the meaning of Christmas* may be many things to many people. But I think that that is really what it means to all of us – that in the birth of the person Jesus of Nazareth, God comes into the life of every person of every time and place and gives that life *meaning*.

Amen.