

Homily for Christmas, 2016

We gather [today/tonight] to remember the birth of someone his contemporaries would have thought a loser – if they heard of him at all. Born homeless; forced as a child into exile as a persecuted religious minority; living his few decades of life in poverty; never raising a family; arrested as a subversive; abandoned by his friends; and executed as a criminal against church and state. Hardly the sort of life his culture admired or celebrated – hardly the sort of life ours does today.

We gather to remember his life at a time of seasonal darkness – midwinter, when the days are short. We remember his life this year at a time also of cultural darkness – too many among us suffer: from addictions, failed relationships, job insecurity, and (perhaps above all) the growing coarseness of our leaders, of media, and even of daily life. And the darkness that comes from fear of what the future may bring.

Why do we gather? Because the authorities that made Jesus, Mary, and Joseph homeless refugees and exiles failed in their hopes to eliminate him. Because the government plan that led to “there was no room for them in the inn” is forgotten, except for its being a part of this story. The wealthy and powerful of his day who looked down on his poverty have met their own fates, and are now remembered only for the stories he told about them: “There was a rich man who ignored a beggar at his gate; after his death, from the place where he was in torment ...” “The young man went away sad, for he had many possessions...” “I shall tear down my barns and build larger ones!’ But God said, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be over; who will inherit all your wealth...?’” We gather here because we trust and hope that something was at work in the poor, homeless, peasant preacher that was more powerful and lasting than the wealth, the connections, the braggadocio, the scheming, the lies, and the spectacles that filled the days of those who dismissed and mocked him.

Is there any hope? Few of us can come here [today/tonight] without that question lurking somewhere in our minds. What we fear may be immediate: A job we know is likely to disappear in the new year; a child we watch every day coming closer to destroying his or her life with drugs; a parent slipping away toward dying slow step by slow step. Or our fear may be harder to name, but pervasive: How do I raise a child to a life of virtue and happiness in the midst of the dreck on the internet, the materialism of the media, the lying politics, the win-at-any-cost society? Will I be able to afford decent medical care if I get sick? Will a pension, or Social Security, be there when I need them? How will I even know my grandchildren when my children move across the continent? Whatever the fears, is it possible that this man so many called (and would call) a loser give me hope?

Of course we say, Yes. But. He does not give us hope that we will come to sit with the “winners” of the world, will be rich, and healthy, and well-liked, and powerful. In his own words: “Blessed are the poor; the peacemakers; the meek; those who hunger and thirst for justice; the persecuted...” “No one can be my follower unless he takes up his cross every

day ..." "Whoever would save his life in this world will lose it..." What hope He gives is for a life of a different sort, than the sort of life our world admires.

And how do we embrace it, how do we find and walk the path to that distinctive life that Christ offers? We don't think our way into it; we construct that life according to the wisdom of those who have found and taught the way, whom we call the saints. We make the kinds of choices they have shown us, day after day: we build a life, a family, a circle of friends, a church community by actions that saints have shown through the centuries to bring deep and lasting joy, and to offer hope in trails and light in dark times. To come to Mass at Christmas is a good thing; but this Mass will not sustain us in Christ's life through the year. For that, each of us needs to do the things the saints through history have done: they have prayed each day, and so must we pray daily; they have been fed with Christ in the Eucharist every week, and so must we gather weekly to be nourished at the Mass. They have been generous, and truthful, and eager to reconcile and to forgive – and through those daily actions they have built lives of joy for themselves in the face of difficulty and suffering. So can we. And finally they have won the only prize that ultimately matters – eternal life with the One who came to Bethlehem to live in poverty with us, ignored or scorned by the powerful, but living now and forever while those who ignored or despised him, for all their seeming power, are dust and ashes. Christmas reminds us of a choice: Whose way will we follow?