

Homily – Nativity of the Lord

“This Christmas season finds us a rather bewildered human race. We have neither peace within nor peace without. Everywhere paralyzing fears harrow people by day and haunt them by night. Our world is sick with war; everywhere we turn we see its ominous possibilities. And yet, my friends, the Christmas hope for peace and good will toward all men (sic) can no longer be dismissed as a kind of pious dream of some utopian. If we don't have good will toward men (sic) in this world, we will destroy ourselves by the misuse of our own instruments and our own power.”

These are not my words but the opening words that Martin Luther King Jr. preached in a Christmas sermon in 1967. At that time there was war in Vietnam and race riots in the United States. It appears not much has changed in terms of the need for peace. Every year at Christmas in a broken world we pray for the peace the world so desperately needs.

You might think that after centuries of praying for peace and striving for a better world we would give up. Yet every Christmas offers us a time to reflect on the coming of Christ as one like us into the world and God's plan of salvation for us. We continue to embrace the season of peace with hope and joy, even though some of us may carry heavy hearts from the burdens of life.

This year I have seen and heard some hopeful signs. Economic circumstances have people coming up with creative ways to celebrate. My niece told me that she and her brother were not giving each other presents this year but were choosing instead to go out for a meal together. Some people are giving money to a charity instead of buying gifts. There is nothing wrong with giving and receiving a present, everyone loves that. But to see Christmas only as a time that demands gift giving diminishes its meaning.

What is it that Jesus did that we can do? This year the word that describes Christmas, the feast that celebrates the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, is accompaniment, especially with those in need. This is true whether the human need was mental, physical or spiritual. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners to mention a few things. Accompany means to listen, judge and then act with the compassion of Jesus. We need to consider, especially at Christmas, how we can accompany one another as Jesus did during his time on earth.

St. Matthew wrote that when we feed the hungry, visit the sick and imprisoned, clothe the naked, house the homeless and walk with those who grieve, we do it to Jesus. So with this in mind, I would like to share with you a story about Saint Nicholas, a significant saint around the celebration of Christmas.

St. Nicholas was a fourth century saint and bishop of Myra. He was born in Asia Minor in the Roman Empire as an only child to Christian parents. "He was exceedingly well brought up by his parents and trod piously in their footsteps. The child, watched over by the church, enlightened his mind and encouraged his thirst for sincere and true

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religion." Both of his parents tragically died during an epidemic when he was a young man, leaving him well off and determined to devote his inheritance to works of charity.

An opportunity soon arose for St. Nicholas and his inheritance. A citizen of Patara had lost all his money, and needed to support his three daughters who could not find husbands because of their poverty; so the wretched man was going to give them over to prostitution. Nicholas became informed of this, and thus took a bag of gold and threw it into an open window of the man's house in the night. Here was a dowry for the eldest girl and she was soon duly married. At intervals Nicholas did the same for the second and the third; at the last time the father was on the watch, recognized his benefactor and overwhelmed Nicholas with his gratitude.

When we look around us today we may be overwhelmed by the needs of people. People suffering from homelessness and hunger are in the news and on our doorsteps. This could leave us discouraged. But when wondering how to face the challenges of living faithfully I often recall words from Archbishop Mancini and St. Mother Teresa. Bishop Mancini used to often tell me when we were discussing how to address a difficult situation: "Do the best you can with what you have." He reminded me that what I have is to be used for the glory of God. Mother Teresa said: "Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time and always start with the person nearest you." Just like Saint Nicholas. In the world today we may wonder where we start to live our Christian lives. Accompany the person nearest you, says Mother Teresa. I can do my part as a disciple by using the gifts and talents God has entrusted to me to those God brings into my life each day: family, friends and strangers.

We need to remember that God loves us so much that he became one like us to fully experience our humanity and accompany us on our earthly journey. But then Jesus did something even more loving. He sent his disciples to continue His work. This leaves me to ask the question: How can I grow in following Jesus' example of accompaniment, not just now, but throughout the entire year? Something for all of us to consider this holy night and in the year to come.

May God bless you all, and may you and your families have a lovely, wonderful, peaceful, joyful Christmas.