

BIRTHDAY OF THE LORD, MIDNIGHT MASS

December 25, 2011

Isaiah 9:1-7

Acts 14:16-17, 22-25

Matthew 1: 1-25

I expect a lot of you, like me, receive many unsolicited emails, some of which can indeed be infected by viruses and others not especially worth reading even if they are not malicious. Happily, still others are very fine. A week ago I received a message from a friend that included a story that has apparently been making the rounds on the Internet for a couple years and that is worth repeating, even if some of you may have heard it before. Somewhere out west a mother went to the dress rehearsal of the “Winter Pageant” of the school where her son was in kindergarten. Thirteen members of his class lined up in the center of the stage and were supposed to hold up, in turn, large letters that would eventually spell out the words “Christmas Love.” As each letter was held up, the entire class would sing a line for which that letter stood: “C is for Christmas,” “H is for Happy,” and so forth. About halfway through, one little girl mistakenly held up her letter upside down, leading the pupils in all the other classes to start laughing, but the girl didn’t even realize they were laughing at her so she kept proudly holding her letter aloft. When the thirteenth and final letter was held up, no one in the audience laughed anymore and all took notice, for the little girl’s supposed “M” looked like a “W” instead, making the entire phrase indicate why the holiday is celebrated in the first place. The message read not “Christmas Love” but “Christ Was Love.”

This is, after all, the reason why so many people were drawn to Jesus during his life on earth. As one of our contemporaries has written, “Drawn to him not only for his charismatic powers but for the compassion they sensed in him as well, [the people] surrounded him, flocked about him, followed him. He stands by the Sea of Galilee and they press so hard that he has to speak to them from a boat. He sets out for the day and a crowd of several thousand accumulates, ... staying on until suddenly they discover that they are famished.”¹ That his followers eventually came to speak of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God was based primarily on their sense that they saw in him one like God in human form, as we hear in the opening chapter of the Fourth Gospel: “And we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.”

This glory, this splendor, is not unambiguously manifest, of course, for otherwise Jesus would never have had any who opposed him. The late Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar had it right when he once wrote: “The splendor of Christ [then and now] is present in the mode of hiddenness and requires eyes that have adapted to it to be perceived. The glory of the Son can be seen only by one who believes.” This is why we ought always to be deeply thankful for the gift of faith, one of the most precious gifts we could ever receive. And having received it means that we are called to live accordingly, really taking to heart Jesus’ own teaching that whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters we do to him.

It is beyond question that not all of us will do that in the heroic way that we see in the lives of saints and of those who may one day be canonized as saints, but these are the people who help

keep us moving in the right direction even if we don't rise to the level of their observance. To give an example of what I mean, consider the following account from the memoirs of Catherine de Hueck Doherty. She herself was someone who, having experienced much hardship in her escape from Communist Russia, decided to devote the rest of her life to serving the poor, but she also learned in a vivid way how, in doing so, one can always take ever more seriously the teaching of Jesus. On one occasion, Catherine came down from Toronto to visit Dorothy Day at a Catholic Worker house in New York City. The two women were already doing very similar kinds of work and so quickly became the friends that they would remain for life. But there were also differences. Here's the way Catherine described their first meeting:

I found Dorothy in a storefront very much like ours, feeding a breadline in the same way we did—by prayer and begging....

She invited me to spend the night with her. I was to sleep with her in a double bed in a room that was filled with cots. People literally had to climb over one another to get to the beds near the walls. She was providing hospitality to women who were homeless due to the Depression....

As we were preparing for bed there was a knock at the door. A woman (definitely a woman of the streets), without a nose and with active syphilis, walked in and asked if we had room for her. Dorothy welcomed her like a queen and said, "Of course we do." Turning to me, she said, "I have a mattress, Catherine. I will put it in the huge bathtub, and you will be [comfortable there]. I will share the bed with this lady."

Speaking as a nurse, I took Dorothy aside and warned her, "This woman has active syphilis. Make sure you have no cuts on your body. You might easily contract the disease through such a cut." Then I received my first lesson from Dorothy. Usually so mild, gentle, and kind, Dorothy suddenly [rose up] and in a spirited voice said, "Catherine, you have little faith. This is Christ come to us for a place to sleep. He will take care of me. You have to have faith!" [Catherine continued:] I was dumbfounded. This was one of the many lessons she was to teach me by her witnessing and by her example."²

As Dorothy Day herself once wrote in her great Christmas reflection entitled "Room for Christ": "It is no use saying that we are born two thousand years too late to give room to Christ.... Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts. But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that he speaks, with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers, and children that he gazes.... And to those who, [at the Last Judgment] say, aghast, that they never had a chance to [serve Him], that they lived two thousand years too late, He will say again what they had the chance of knowing all their lives, that if these things were done for the very least of His brethren, they were done to Him."³

Mindful of the message that the kindergarten children held up at their pageant, mindful that their message, "Christ Was Love," was only another way of saying what we find in the First Letter of St. John—"God is love"—let us resolve this Christmastide to let such love be reflected ever more keenly in our own lives, our own words and behavior. And may our sharing in the sacramental body and blood of Christ at this Eucharist deepen that resolve, for there could be no better way of showing that we have really grasped what the celebration of Christmas is all about.

¹Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 328.

² Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *Fragments of My Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1979), 108.

³ Dorothy Day, "Room for Christ," quoted by Mark and Louise Zwick, "The Incarnation Impacts the World," *Houston Catholic Worker* (Nov.-Dec. 2011), 9.