

Solemnity of Christmas – December 25, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – Midnight and 10:00am Masses – 900 words

The whole world had been waiting for a savior – had been waiting for centuries upon centuries. But when he finally comes, there is “no room for him in the inn”.<sup>1</sup> As St. John said in the prologue to his gospel, “...the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him.”<sup>2</sup> This is a rather stunning fact for us to consider: it is a tragedy of our human existence. We can so desire something on one level, yet, when we finally have the chance to have that thing, we can let the chance pass us by.

But why did things happen this way? The Christmas Proclamation told us that “the whole world was at peace” when Christ was born. He was born during the *Pax Romana* – the “Roman peace”. Under the powerful conquest of the Roman Empire a relative peace had descended upon what was basically the entire known world of that time, extending from the westernmost part of Europe to the western reaches of Asia. Major disturbances to the public order had been quelled and, at least in an external way, the world was a peaceful place.

With external peace comes a false sense of security. Things are going well. Everyone is basically getting along. The economy is good. One begins to feel more self-sufficient. And the need for a savior decreases. It would seem that the people of Bethlehem had been lulled into a spiritual complacency by this peace, with an embarrassing outcome for their history: the Messiah came to them out of all the possible towns, and they missed the opportunity to show him hospitality. “He came to his own, and his own received him not”.<sup>3</sup>

Well, external peace is not of the luxuries we generally enjoy in our time. But would we miss our chance if Jesus came to us today? It’s quite possible we would also. For we have filled our own world with so many distractions. Even if we live under constant threat of things like terrorism, protests, and trials by the mob of public opinion, yet we have just so many distractions: from technology, endless sources of entertainment, and a hedonistic culture that constantly bids us seek carnal pleasure. These things do blind us.

But the truth is that every age has its security blankets. Every age stands at risk of missing its chance with God. We are no different than the people of Bethlehem – though what gives us a false security is far different from what gave them that sense. But there is a greater tragedy still: for the story of Bethlehem shows us how we are so willing to settle for a merely external or superficial sense of peace and security, in spite of the fact that God offers us a peace that surpasses understanding:<sup>4</sup> a peace more profound and more stable.

Yes, the peace of God is something that nothing in this world can give, as the scripture tells us.<sup>5</sup> And it is available to all those who open their arms to receive the babe of Bethlehem. God invites us to that peace by coming in our midst in such a disarming way: not with a show of power and a flash of glory, but in the simplicity of a little baby, adorable and loving, tugging on our heartstrings. Nothing prevented God from choosing another way: he could have come as a grown man making heads roll. But no; he surprises us and challenges us.

As we contemplate him lying there in the manger, we must recall that it is cold, the straw is rough, and the animals stink. Yet, our own souls have been this way: our hearts have been cold at times, we have our rough edges, and our sin does not exactly have the odor of sweetness. What’s more, we are incapable of healing ourselves; we cannot, from our own efforts, sweep out

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gospel from Midnight Mass.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gospel from Mass of Christmas Day.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Philippians 4:7.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. John 14:27.

our stable before he comes. “But to those who did accept him”, St. John says, “he gave power to become children of God.”<sup>6</sup> If we but open our hearts, he will do the rest.

We should pray this Christmas that we might never again repeat the embarrassing and tragic mistake that the people of Bethlehem made. May we always be ready to receive God, realizing that we are incapable of giving him a fitting welcome – that all we can do is open our hearts. Yet that is all he desires! If we open our hearts to him, he will do the rest. That is what it means for him to be our savior: he does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. None of the securities this frenzied world offers can save us; only God can.

I invite you to ask yourself what gives you peace today: is it God and God alone? Or is it not also – or even rather – money, technology, social standing, political affiliation, and the like? But each one of those is a fragile and passing reality. Only God is unshakable. Yes, we may need those things to one degree or another in order to function in this world – but let our peace be rooted in God, not in those things. Jesus Christ came to offer us a peace that this world cannot give. Let us open our hearts and our homes – every aspect of our lives – to him.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gospel from Mass of Christmas Day.