

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:00pm Mass – 750 words

Christmas, in a certain sense, is the birthday of us all. For Christ's whole purpose in becoming man was to save you and to save me – to offer the hope of salvation to all people of every time and place. God could have saved us any way he wished; it was not necessary that he should become a man, that he should condescend from the heights of heaven and subject himself to the fragility of the human condition in a cruel world. But the Incarnation was the most fitting way that the Father saw to accomplish his purpose. So he sent his Son, and as Christ's heart was formed and grew in the womb of the Virgin Mary, we were already in it – for he came to save us.

So here we are, two millennia later, but already present then in the heart of Christ, when he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and laid in the manger in that bleak midwinter – the first Christmas. His coming as man was not generic: it was not for the purpose of saving a faceless, anonymous multitude. No, it was intentional – again, he already knew us all. More than that, he chose us. He chose us then and he chooses us now. Indeed, he chose us from all eternity to be here now, in this place, with its specific challenges and particular joys. God does not do “random acts of kindness”: everything he does is bespoke; and he does all things well.¹

In my prayer each Christmas I often end up getting “stuck” on how there was no room for Jesus in the inn, as we again heard in the gospel. How did Mary and Joseph feel when they met with that rejection? Was there not a temptation to indignation? What if it had been us, trying to find a fitting place for the Son of God to be born? Would not we even have been tempted, even to outrage? Joseph could well have claimed the Holy Family's rightful prerogatives: “Do you know who we are?” But no indication is given that they indulged such temptations. No, their hearts were docile and trusting; their wills were resigned to the Lord's providence and plan.

Oh, but let us ask the Christ child for that grace this Christmas: that we may be more docile and trusting, that we may have a holy resignation to all that God provides or permits for us, within his great plan. He chose us then – he chooses us now. Nothing escapes his notice. Mary and Joseph planned to find a room in an inn, but it was not to be. How often have we, though, set out with our plans – and then, when those plans were foiled, have we ended up indignant? How often have we not wanted to claim our rights, as if to say to God, “Do you know who I am!?” He does know: in fact, he knows far better than we.

But who are we, really? One correct answer is: We are nothing; we are dust. Yet, for however true that might be, it is not really the focus of this feast. And in any case, God did not come to save nothing. We have sinned in so many ways, yet he saw all that in advance. He knew what we would do! And in spite of that, he saw great potential in us. He still thought it worthwhile to come, to share our nature and our condition, to suffer with and for us; indeed, to adopt us as his own. Do we trust his plans or not? Do we keep resisting them – looking for a resting place, as it were, where there is none – or do we submit to him?

The answer to the question, “Who are we?”, is that we are God's beloved sons and daughters. He conceived us in the heart of his Son from all eternity. As we celebrate Christ's birth, by faith we see that we were there, also, in a very real way. The angels sang; the animals adored; Mary and Joseph, with docility and trust – with holy resignation to God's plans – made the best of a difficult situation, one they perhaps had not expected. And though so much of what took place went unnoticed by the majority, even the smallest detail was noted by God. He chose us then and he chooses us now. May he help us to trust! A very Merry Christmas to all!

¹ See Mark 7:37.