

Christmas Homily - December 25, 2002

by Fr. Brian Joyce

I want you, just for a moment, to imagine those shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, staring up at the star-filled night sky. I want you to imagine that because when we look at the night in the year 2002 (despite the interference of smog and haze and city lights!) we understand and we see a very different sky than they did - we understand and we see something they could not imagine, let alone spot.

This struck me last week when I heard the report of Carl Sagan, the famous astronomer, that he made on PBS shortly before his death. What he said is that there are more stars up there, out there, more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on all the beaches on the planet Earth! Incredible! And last week I heard an interview with a living physicist-astronomer, and he was asked, "Was Sagan right when he said that?" And his answer was, "No, he was wrong. Because today we know, courtesy of the Hubble telescope and our satellites, that he underestimated the number of stars and the size of the universe. He did not have any idea how many more there were out there - more even than that."

I'm sure the shepherds found that night sky impressive, but it is far more awesome and its story is far more amazing than anyone could have imagined before names like Darwin, and Einstein, and Hubble, and Hawking came into our vocabulary. We live in a huge universe and we are just a tiny, wayside planet. That might make us feel pretty insignificant and pretty unimportant. But with Christmas eve, we celebrate that the God of the universe (the God of the universe who is a far more mighty and awesome force than the prophets and our ancestors could ever have imagined) has broken through into history in the human race and in the person of Jesus Christ to say that we really do matter, we are all of great value and of great worth, and come what may that God is with us to stay, and will stick with us as companion, advocate, and friend.

Christmas is supposed to stand for that simple and clear and awesome message, but the way we celebrate the holiday is an endless list of mixed messages - a strange mixture of faith and disbelief, of belief and total denial: take for example the Christmas tree, a totally pagan custom of tree-worship adapted by Christian believers and now bought, put up, and decorated in homes of sincere believers and in the home of those who believe in nothing at all. Or take our rush to buy and give gifts in time for December 25 - followed by our rush to the mall on December 26 to return whatever didn't fit or disappointed us. Mixed signals!

I saw a great cartoon today - it showed Mary and Joseph and Jesus in the stable, and Mary is looking at all the gifts - the gold, the frankincense, the myrrh - and she's saying,

"There's got to be a gift certificate in here somewhere!"

Now those very mixed signals are one more reason that I absolutely love Christmas and the Christmas season. With its mixed signals, Christmas is so true to life. Real life is always made up of mixed signals; it's not just black and white - all good or all evil - we're not just people who are either perfect or imperfect - rather it gets very gray, with extremely good people sometimes doing very stupid and evil things, or doing the wrong thing for the right reason; and people who we think of us as bad producing good or the right things for the wrong reason - we are all a mix, every one of us.

This universe, begun some 13 or 14 billion years ago by a burst of love of our awesome God, is still quite unfinished - in fact it is just barely getting started. If we could put its story into a single calendar year we would find that the human race arrived just a few minutes ago and the birth of Jesus took place only a split-second ago. God is not finished with us yet and we are all very much a work in progress - we have a long way to go.

That goes a long way to explain the darkness, the difficulty, the tragedy and evil that regularly accompany us through life. But the birth of Jesus along with his death and rising - which happened just a very brief 2000 years ago - gives us clear direction of where God's love and promise is leading us and how God is asking us to live.

We do need light in darkness, we do need some realistic hopes and goals and dreams, and we do need a compass to guide us on our way.

I find that light and I find that compass in the person of Jesus Christ: in his wisdom and values, in his stories and teaching, in his life, death and resurrection. In some ways it keeps coming back to care and compassion (like His) for all people and for our entire world - but that keeps getting spelled out in different ways. I think from the beginning of creation, when God burst forth and said, "Let there be light," God's care and compassion keeps driving things and inviting us onward, but we have to spell that out in many different ways.

Since you all need to get home to Christmas packages and holiday celebrations - let me make just a suggestion of three concrete goals or guides:

First of all, we need the goal of integrity. It's difficult for Catholic clergy to talk about integrity these days. In a recent poll, the Harris poll company reports a huge drop in confidence in clergy, almost certainly a result of a year of scandal and crisis. A year ago, 90% of adults felt confidence in the clergy. This has fallen 26%, to 64%. We (clergy) now rank below teachers, doctors, and professors. We are now (and this is sad!) dead even with judges, military officers and with President Bush. But we are still

far ahead of accountants, lawyers, members of Congress, news reporters, and (get this!) those who take polls! My point about integrity is that it has to be earned by each and every one of us each day and even when lost, it can be rescued and recovered but only if we honestly work at care and compassion for one another, which means reaching out beyond ourselves and for each other - every day.

A second goal is just to notice, to really notice God's creation and God's people and God's gifts. There's a story of a woman who died, and she wakes up in this wonderful and beautiful land that she has never seen before. And fortunately there is an angel there, and she says, "Where am I? What is this place?" And the angel says, "This is your home, this is earth, this is where you've been your whole life! You've finally had time to notice it, to enjoy it, to give thanks for it, and to take care of it." That's the second goal I would suggest. If we could just notice one another and our world, care and compassion will quickly follow.

And here's the third and final goal that I'd suggest for Christmas eve, and you'll love it. Will you lighten up? This is a big universe, with a long way to go, but we don't walk alone, and we don't live alone. The God of the universe, made present and revealed in Jesus Christ can be trusted to value us deeply, to walk with us always, to never quit on us or give up on being our companion, advocate, and friend - a God of constant concern and compassion for us all.

So this evening, lighten up, celebrate, give thanks, and enjoy! Merry Christmas!