

## Midnight Mass, December 24, 2005

Fr. Brian Joyce

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I hope you are comfortable up here. We carpeted it especially for you. You know, some of the churches have marble, slate and we made this as comfortable as possible because the sermons here are terrible! They are long and they are painful, and I get carried away because I love Christmas. I love the decorations. I love the celebration. I love the Christmas cards. I got a great card the other day. It showed Mary and Joseph going through their gifts, the frankincense, incense and myrrh. Mary says, "Just keep looking, Joseph. There is bound to be a gift certificate in here somewhere."

There is a bit of a problem with Christmas for us. I'd say it's because it's a dilemma. We end up as a people over two thousand years either believing too much or too little. If we believe too much it gets unreal. It gets like a fantasy. It gets like a fairy tale, and we say, "Forget it." And if we believe too little, we miss the point of the gospel, the point of the story, the point that God is making to us about God's way with ourselves.

We believe too much. Christmas is surrounded and overgrown with legends, especially about this night and this moment. If you go back to the ancient scriptures and the ancient scrips and scribes, you find them talking about "In the midnight hour..." Here we are, on Christmas Eve. All kinds of wonderful things begin to happen. The cattle kneel toward the stable. The plants and trees in the Jordan Valley bow toward Bethlehem. The animals in the field and your pets at home begin speaking like human beings to one another. We have this in the ancient scriptures and scribes. They always speak in Latin, which is why you never noticed. But there are all these wonderful legends. It's in Shakespeare's Hamlet. They talk about that if, at midnight, anyone dies, they go straight into the gates of Paradise. And if a child is born in the midnight hour, they grow up with the power of seeing spirits and commanding them. It is believing too much. We smile at it. The point is that it is a special time. But if we believe too much, we say, "That's fairy tale. That's fantasy. Forget it."

I want to say, "That's not our problem today." Our problem is usually believing too little. We don't get it. We miss the point. Rather than the gospel story and the historical facts, we get commercialized, sanitized and trivialized versions of the Christmas story. We get them in our public displays. We get them in our Christmas cards. We get them at the shopping mall. We get them in our decorations here in church. The problem, even though you read about this in the papers, the problem is not being politically correct. That ain't the problem. The problem is being historically accurate. We miss that all the time. We remember Mary and Joseph as a neat, clean-clothed couple, the Ken and Barbie of the first century. Not true. We think of the shepherds as

sweet and devout and well-scrubbed, as the manger scene as something as hygienic as the ward in Children's Hospital. And the truth is that Mary and Joseph were among the poor, the tired, the dirty, the homeless. I was in New York a week and a half ago, just missed the subway strike. I was there for two days. I was staying at the Holy Names Center for Homeless Men. And I took a subway ride up to Penn Station. I get on the subway, and one stop the doors open and a young woman comes in, old clothes, a blanket on her shoulders, and when the doors close, she says, "Excuse me. I don't want to offend anybody. I don't want to embarrass anybody, but I am homeless. I am taking care of my mother. If anybody can give me a dollar or two we can eat today." And she walked down the aisle. Now, we all have different views of panhandling. But I want to say that probably was a better view of Mary, the Madonna of Bethlehem, than the ones we have on our holy cards. And the shepherds, they were looked on as the dregs, the lowliest among society. Their chief reputation was you couldn't trust them. According to rabbis, they could never witness to anything because shepherds were untrustworthy. And the stable, two things you know about the stable where Jesus was born. You had to hold your nose and you had to watch your step. The holy cards don't show us that. With our sanitized version, we believe too little and we miss the point.

The point is our God comes to us on our worst days, not just on our best days. You know, that's how most of us are. On my good days, I am feeling great and I am thanking God. I am praising God, and everything is great, and God is near. It's on our worst days that God comes among us. On our worst days, God comes to us when we can't seem to hold it all together, when the world seems to be coming apart at the seams. I don't know about you. I get the feeling the world seems that it is coming apart at the seams. We sing Holy Night, Silent Night, Beautiful Night, and we have hundreds of thousands of young people in harm's way in the face of death on our behalf in Iraq. And we have the people of Iraq in danger of death and terror. It's almost like the time when Jesus was born in occupied territory. Or we look around at our own county and what we have now are rotating homeless shelters. We have one ourselves, part of Winter Nights. We take it for a couple of weeks and it moves to another church. We can't get a regular place for good people who need a roof over their heads. It's a little bit like the land of Jesus where they said there was no room in the inn. And this Jesus who we celebrate tonight, remember he grew up to be legally executed as a criminal. We live in a state that has more people on death row than any other jurisdiction probably in the whole world. We've got somebody scheduled for January 17th who is legally blind, in a wheel chair and waiting for heart surgery. Now, you may have different views of capital punishment, but we're of a civilized, humane society. We've got to say, "Well, for some reason, we don't have it all together, Lord."

And today's feast reminds us that God comes to us when we don't have it all together. And that goes for us as individuals. You know, sometimes it's the economy. It's employment. It's hard to keep things together. Sometimes it's our relationships and that we find more often, resentment and coldness is in the middle of our relationships rather than warmth and love. Or we find that many in our parish are grieving, that they have lost someone in death recently or in the last year or years ago and it still hurts. Or people dealing with depression, despite modern medicine and therapy, not just at holiday season, but all year long. All that stuff is going on. And today's feast

says that when we don't quite yet have it all together, that's when our God comes. When there is no room in the inn, when it's hard times and real life, our God comes to us. It's precisely then that Jesus breaks through.

I think of Jesus Christ. What's Jesus Christ all about? Number one, a breakthrough of God in real life, not in make-believe life, not in the fun times, but in real life, in the up and down times, in both good and bad. God is a breakthrough in Jesus. And in Jesus we get a model of what we are trying to do with good life, compassion and hope and integrity and joy. And we get a glimpse of what our God is about. Jesus is like a window to see what's God really like.

I have this little book by William Sloan Coffin. It's a great book. William Sloan Coffin was the chaplain in the sixties at Yale. He was the pastor of Riverside Church in New York in the seventies. And he is immortalized in a Doonesbury cartoon. You can see him there all the time as Reverend Sloan. He's got great stuff in here. I love this. He says, "Clearly, the trick in life is to die young, as late as possible. I kind of like that. But the point I want to make is that Jesus is a window that shows us pretty much what our God is like and what Coffin says is, "Jesus is both a mirror to our humanity and a window to divinity, a window revealing how much of God is given to mortal eyes to see. When Christians see Christ taking care of the weak, scorning the powerful, healing the wounded, we are seeing transparently the power of God at work. What is finally important is not that Christ is God-like, but that God is Christ-like." God's like Christ and that's all we need to know. Right? That's good news. That's great news. That's worth celebrating any day of the year.

And, you know, the other thing is that our God doesn't make bad things go away. I don't know about you. That's my experience. He doesn't make bad things go away. I was going to ask for a show of hands earlier. How many here know somebody who is diagnosed with cancer. Everybody knows that. Everybody knows that. You know? God doesn't make it go away but God stands with us. It's not that he prevents bad things from happening and puts a suit of armor around us. But he stands with us and helps us get through it. All saving ideas are born small. God comes to earth as a child so that we can finally grow up, take responsibility for our lives. I said it before and I will probably say it many times again. God provides minimum protection but maximum support. Joseph and Mary didn't have protection from having no place to stay, or having to go to a stable. But God was with them and God is with us. You peel away all the ancient legends, the myths and the stories, and you undo the sanitized version of Christmas cards and of the shopping mall and of our neat decorations. And what you find is that our God walks with us, even on our worst days, calls us to be hopeful, cheerful people.

One thing I love about Jesus. He never got accused of being glum. He got accused of going to too many parties. Be like Jesus. Isn't that great? Be like Jesus. Even on our worst days, our God calls us to hope, to mutual support, to know that we are loved, and we are called by the way we live, and treat each other, to pass that great message on. That's what we are here for tonight. Pass that great message on. That's good news! That's worth celebrating. That's worth saying "Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!" Amen.