

Homily Christmas 2017

The birth of a child is a memorable experience for a family. An indelible memory from when I was just shy of four years old was the birth of my younger brother Tom. I distinctly remember the day he was brought home from the hospital. First, I remember watching my mother step from the car and approach the house. I was struck by how beautiful, how radiant, she looked. Then I remember once everyone was in the house and settled, that I slipped into the bedroom where Tom had been placed, not to be disturbed. I couldn't resist, I just had to sneak in and peek into the little basinet to see my new baby brother. He looked so tiny and peaceful.

Over the years many more memories were created. Birth was only the beginning, and yet the detail remained etched in my young brain, no doubt preserved by newer memories. Of course, the memories of the birth of a child are more profound for parents. Now fathers are often in the room and pictures are being taken. I can only imagine all the wonder and sense of responsibility the parents feel about the child's future. Other memories will follow: a baptism, a first step, first words, starting school, First Communion and confirmation. Eventually there will be more education, work, marriage and a new generation of children. Along the way there are joys and sorrows, a lot of work and hopefully a lot of play. All of these are layers on the indelible first memory of the birth.

Today we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Our nativity scene gives us a stylized image of the event. We can only imagine all the real elements that made the night so memorable for Mary and Joseph. Some we know of from the scripture. There was the arduous journey to Bethlehem to fulfill the census. There was lack of a more suitable lodging. There were the special visitors: angels, shepherds and eventually magi from the east. No doubt there was uncertainty about the future of their child. They were told of his mysterious divine origin. But that did not mean they understood. Like all parents they would have to move forward, trusting in God's help, to fulfill their responsibilities.

With the exception of a single event when Jesus was 12 years old we have to imagine the details of what Mary and, for a time Joseph, experienced as Jesus grew and later worked as a carpenter. The scriptures do give us the detail of Jesus' final three years, the three years of His public ministry which occurred after Joseph had died. We know from the testimony of scripture that the events recorded were part of the active memory of Mary His Mother.

It is the historical and spiritual significance of the life of Jesus that is responsible for the collective cultural

memory of His birth especially as we celebrate Christmas each year. We each have our own particular associations with the annual celebration of Jesus' birth, and these are likely drawn from a variety of experiences. What is beneath the collective cultural memory and what should be at the front and center of our celebrations is the great mystery that Jesus' birth expresses for people of Christian faith. We believe that our almighty God could and would choose to take on human flesh, we call this the incarnation, that He became one with us in our humanity, in order to reach out and lift us up into new relationship with Him. And He started a an infant child, born in a stable in Bethlehem.

We speak of God's becoming Man in Jesus as the central mystery of our faith. That is why we bow our head when we mention that article of faith when we recite the Creed at Mass. And today to underscore the connection between the mystery and Jesus' birth we will drop to our knees for a moment in the midst of the Creed. That our God would lower Himself to become human and begin in the way that we all do, with conception, nine months in the womb and birth is an exercise of humility and vulnerability. The words and deeds of Jesus passed on to us are layers of additional memories of teaching and miracles that are added to our collective memory of the incarnational event of His birth. In time the vulnerability of God in human flesh would become the instrument of our salvation when He would be arrested, crucified, die upon the cross only to all the more proclaim His being truly God by rising from the dead.

Jesus' activity as God Incarnate did not cease when He ascended to His rightful place in heaven. He continues to be present and work in the flesh through His Church. In every baptism He adopts people into God family and makes one's body, one's flesh, a temple of the Holy Spirit and the actions of the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ, extend into the world throughout history.

He most profound incarnate presence and work of Jesus Christ is here in the Mass. The saving death is more than a memory, it is present here. Bread and wine are a material substance that become the Body of Christ to be consumed as food. Here, as no where else, we receive the power to take the Incarnate God out into the world through actions that put into flesh His teaching. This Eucharistic incarnation is also humbling and filled with vulnerability for Jesus Christ. The presence of almighty God under the appearance of mere bread and wine can lend itself to misunderstanding, trivialization or abuse. I sometime think people's failure to appreciate the power of the Mass is because they don't understand the Mass.

That's why this year's Christmas gift book is a practical teaching tool on the Mass.

Just as the good actions of our children produce new memories that preserve the birth memory, so our good actions, following from the Incarnation of God in every Mass have the power to produce new and good memories that enrich both memory and gratitude that Jesus was born in the first place.

May we go forth today to our celebrations of the birth of Jesus, God Incarnate, and may we make new good memories that will deepen other's appreciation of Jesus, birth.