

“Where Is Jesus?”

John 1:14

December 25, 2010

Christmas Day

Nativity scenes are one of the most beloved Christmas decorations in many people's homes. Many people have nativity scenes which they have owned and have put up in exactly the same way for years. The crowning point of every nativity scene and often the last piece put in the nativity scene is the Baby Jesus in the manger. I don't think anyone would be offended by this representation of Jesus or worry that we are in danger of worshipping it.

Yet, when we have a crucifix (a cross displaying the crucified Christ) either in a processional cross or around our necks, it produces those reactions in people. Some are offended by this representation of Jesus. Some will accuse us of worshipping this “idol”. Probably the same people who would be offended if we left Baby Jesus in the manger out of our nativity scenes are offended when we show crucified Jesus on the cross.

Why is this? Some will say a crucifix is “too Catholic”. Others will say that an empty cross is better because it is a symbol of the resurrection. Still others will allow a crucifix on Good Friday but will say that it is too offensive when it intrudes on our celebration of Christmas.

How valid are these criticisms? First, the fact that a certain church makes use of a symbol does not taint it just because we disagree with the teachings of that church. Not all things “Catholic” are wrong or bad. Secondly, an empty cross in and of itself does not represent the resurrection. Jesus' cross would have been empty had He not risen from the dead just like the crosses of the two dead thieves were empty. An empty tomb would be a better symbol of the resurrection. Thirdly, is a crucifix too offensive? It all depends upon where we expect to look for Jesus.

Our text for today begins by saying, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” This is what we see on Christmas. The Word – the Son of God – who had nine months earlier been conceived by the Virgin Mary was now being born in human flesh.

This is the Jesus everyone wants to see. The Baby in the manger invokes all sorts of warmy and fuzzy feelings. We get the idea that God loves us by the fact that His Son became flesh and was born in this most difficult way.

But, if you stop to think about it, how does the Word becoming flesh and lying in a manger actually help us? Other than being an example of how to endure a difficult birth and persevere under

difficult post-natal conditions, Jesus' birth in and of itself does nothing to help us. It makes for a beautiful and sentimental nativity scene, but not much else.

We have more difficult and more serious things with which to deal. There is our estrangement from God. By virtue of the sinful condition into which everyone of us has been born and the sinful actions which come from that condition, we are separated from God. Although many people may see only the sinful actions on the surface and conclude that they are character flaws which need to be corrected (perhaps by the example of the Christ Child), the Word of God tells us that sin is a 100% fatal disease for 100% of the people. The certain death of humanity, both physically on earth and eternally in hell, is not something that the birth of a Baby can conquer. The power of Satan to hold us in the fear of death is not something that a cute nativity scene can overcome.

Where should we look? Our text goes on, "and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." Now many people might think that Jesus' glory is to be found in manger scenes, herald angels and Christmas stars. Those are things which we also like as part of our Christmas story and do not offend us.

But that is not where Jesus tells us to look for His glory. He tells us to look for His glory in a very different place – a place that might trouble us and offend us. It is not until Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday that he begins talking about His glory. He said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.... Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die." (John 12:21,31-33) Jesus' glory is not in His birth, but in His death. His place of glorification is not in a manger but on a cross.

In the crucifixion, we do not see anything remotely related to being "warm and fuzzy." The cross is a powerful symbol of God's anger over sin and His judgment of sin. For any who are offended by a crucifix, the fact of the matter is: you should be. This is God's anger against *your* sin. This is God's judgment of *your* sin. It is an absolutely horrible display of suffering, both physically and spiritually.

Yet, at the same time, the crucifix is the most wonderful display of God's love and mercy. And this is where Christ's body on the cross is so crucial. We see God's anger poured out on Jesus instead of us. We see our sins judged and punished in Jesus. As a result, God is no longer angry at

us. Our sins have all been forgiven. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we escape punishment and have new life that not even death can stop.

Both Christ in the manger and Christ on the cross are essential to understanding our salvation and in practicing on piety. Neither are objects of worship. Both help in understanding who God is and what He has done for us in Jesus Christ. Christ in the manger shows us who God is. Christ on the cross shows us what God does.

Christ in the manger is important, not because of its cuteness, but because it shows us the incarnation – the Word made flesh. God did not save us from His throne in heaven by His might, but He came and became one of us to rescue us in His humility. We look at the manger, not with sentimentality, but with hope and anticipation. God's plan to rescue us from sin, death, and the devil has begun in this little baby.

Christ on the cross is important, not because of its goriness, but because it shows us what God went through to save us. He took on our sin, experienced hell, and died. He did this so that we might be holy and righteous in God's eyes, avoid hell altogether, and encounter death only as a gateway to everlasting life. We look at the crucifix, not with offense or disgust, but with gratitude and praise. God's plan to rescue us from sin, death, and the devil, begun in a lowly manger on Christmas Day, has been fulfilled in the beaten, bloody, and dead body of Christ.

Without the incarnation, no salvation is possible. Without the crufixion, the incarnation is meaningless. Therefore, we look to the baby in the manger and the dead man on the cross and see our forgiveness, our hope, and our salvation.

*Why lies He in such mean estate Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christians, fear; for sinners here The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, The cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh, The babe, the son of Mary!*

Amen