

**Christmas Day Mass**  
**Our Lady of Dallas**  
**December 25, 2019**  
**Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18**  
**Fr. John Bayer**

Our opening prayer today begins with a declaration about our nature as human beings, namely, that it was “wonderfully created” and “still more wonderfully restored”. And then the prayer proceeds to a petition: that we may share in the divinity of Christ, “who humbled himself to share in our humanity”. These last words are prayed quietly at every mass by the priest or deacon as he mixes the water and wine while preparing the gifts: “By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” Christmas is a time to marvel at what we are.

**What are we?**

Well, what are we? What is a human being? The mystery of Christmas is the mystery of God and man, an insight into what we really are by God’s design. I can’t imagine any religion, philosophy or ideology that could fail to offer some answer to this question: *What are we?* Are we just an irrational animal, a cleverer and more selfish monkey, a wild consumer and plague upon the environment? Are we all just pieces in a faceless, economic order? Are we just an accident in a lonely universe doomed to the absurdity of endlessly recreating ourselves through our ever-swirling and un-anchorable passions? Those are some answers we hear, and I cannot understand what anyone could find to be true or life-giving about them. And yet, given the painfully obvious facts of sin and death, it is understandable that these answers tempt so many today.

**We are an enigma before Christmas.**

Even Scripture is ambivalent about human beings, at least it is until “these last days” when God no longer “spoke in partial and various ways” but rather “through the Son” who is the “heir of all things” and the one Word through whom all things were made and therefore find their origin and end, their identity and purpose, their meaning. For before Christmas, Scripture, with brutal honesty, notes the enigmatic character of our sinful and mortal condition.

Before the flood, we see our depravity: “*When the Lord saw how great the wickedness of human beings was on earth, and how every desire that their heart conceived was always nothing but evil, the Lord regretted making human beings on the earth, and his heart was grieved.*” (Genesis 6:5-6). And then the psalmist confirms the universality of our iniquity, “*From heaven the Lord looks down on the human race, to see if any are wise, if any seek God. All have gone astray, depraved, every one; there is no one who does any good; no, not even one.*” (Psalm 14:2-3). And in Ecclesiastes, we read about our lot as men and women exiled from Eden: “*A bad business God has given*

*to human beings to be busied with. I have seen all things that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a chase after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and you cannot count what is not there.” (Ecclesiastes 1:13-15).*

**But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse.**

Such painful verses! And yet how familiar is all this! Both God and man had reason to be unsatisfied with the course of human history: we are able to know the truth and yet we prefer lies; able to love and be happy and yet we choose selfishness and bitterness. The disappointing riddle of our existence is constantly reasserting itself in our ignorance, willfulness, dysfunction...

But then at last there is one human being whom God affirms as his *beloved Son*. There, on Christmas, is at last a shoot sprouting from the stump of our history, upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests (cf. Isaiah 11:1-9). And this shoot shows us what it *really* means to be human.

**Christ reveals us to ourselves (cf. *Gaudium et spes* 22).**

Christ reveals us to ourselves. And the creature that he reveals us to be is one that can beat with the very heart of God, one that can swallow up anything our history has to offer in the encompassing fires of unconditional love and communion. That is what we are made to be: unconditional lovers able to live forever together with God.

The Christian view of human beings is that we are wonderfully made; and that our humanity is an open invitation to live the very life of God. Our humanity is good in itself, like water; and yet it is able to become something far greater when it is immersed into God and allowed to participate in God’s own life, like the water that becomes wine as they are mixed together. When we exercise our minds and hearts as human beings, when we strive to know and love the wonderful world around us, we know something about the Truth and Goodness permeating all reality, about God. Our human nature is open and oriented to God. We are all of us good creatures; it is good that we are here. Even more, the Incarnation shows that God can know and love in us, with his own strength. To use a very clumsy computer analogy, we have an operating system that can run the divine program: we can know and love like God himself. Human life is infinitely valuable because it is a capable of God’s own life.

This is the message of the baby Jesus: he is a real human being whose heart beats with the rhythm of God’s own life. The revelation of Christmas, of the Incarnate Son of God, is not simply about who God is; for the infant Jesus also reveals *who can share in the life of God*. Coming as the incarnate Son, God reveals himself to us *through an invitation*: “Here I am! *And what I am you too can enjoy! You are able to become like me, since, look, I am like you!*” What is so specific to Christian faith is what is so marvelous about the Incarnation of God, namely the *familiarity of his face*: he has the face of a little baby. When God draws near to us, he extends an invitation. In revealing himself, in the very same breath, he reveals his desire for us to participate in his own life.

This life that is adored by myriads of angels because it is God's life; and yet at the same time this life is held in Mary's hands because it is now also our own.

### **While dying like men, we live like God.**

But how is it possible that we human beings can live as God lives? The apparent contradiction between human and divine life is insurmountable for those who do not know God, that is, for those who insist – against Christ – that to be divine is to be a “superhuman” with magic powers and bulletproof immortality, rather than what is far more impressive and real, namely, eternal and creative love, which we can still know even in the throes of our finitude and mortality, as the child Jesus will prove to us as he grows and fulfills his destiny by his death and resurrection. We may not be magical or bulletproof, but that is no obstacle to sharing God's life; for the essence of his life is eternal and creative love, and that, as Jesus showed us, can be enjoyed even with a lance through our side. Thanks be to God that when he revealed himself and our destiny in himself, he did so credibly: he did not promise the moon to those he had created unable to live there. The life he promises us is one that he has equipped us to enjoy, even now on earth, mortal as we are. The consequences of sin and death are for human beings no obstacle to knowing and loving – and therefore living – like God. Jesus proved that when he knew and loved his Father through the grave and into eternal life.

### **Take this life as your light.**

The contradiction is also insurmountable for those who do not believe *in every man and women as God reveals them to be*, or for those who insist that this divine love, however beautiful it is on the face of the infant Jesus, is simply not meant for me or you. We are too sinful: we bitterly hold onto resentments against family, friend, confreres; we are too jealous, too insecure, too unhappy with God's providence to be at peace and in goodwill toward others.... If this is how we are thinking today – and in some measure it is all of us – let us look hard into that crib. Cast down every idol, and every insecurity about yourself. On God's own authority we have been told that in that crib is the Incarnate God; and in that Incarnate God is your and my destiny. Let us stop the false humility. Stop doubting him and ourselves. The one who has called us is faithful; and he will do what he has promised (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:24).<sup>1</sup> He knows that each of us, like Peter, is a “sinful man” and yet he refuses to “depart” from us – on the contrary, he has come so close to us (cf. Lk 5:8).

Israel painfully knew, as we do, the experience of failure and infidelity of every kind: religious, marital, political, economic. Israel suffered, as we do, the consequences of sin: sufferings of every kind: spiritual loneliness; division in ourselves and in our communities; slavery to our passions and to the foreign idols of money, power and pleasure; loss of a true home, physically or emotionally. The prophets looked forward to a time when they could “see directly, before their eyes, the Lord restoring Zion.” And then the shepherds and wise men saw Zion restored in an infant lying in a manger: a human

---

<sup>1</sup> “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

being enjoying an unparalleled communion with God, a human life animated by God's own.

We can become like Christ, for we are made for his way of living. Let us take his life as our own light; nothing else matters apart from him. His life is utterly unique. Jesus is the only Son of the Father. But as the Son he is also the one "through whom he created the universe" (Hebrews 1) and "without him nothing came to be" (John 1). None of us is therefore more than a single spiritual step away from union with him and his divine life. Everything that exists, our every day and moment, no matter how small or great in the narrow eyes of the world, belongs to the Son as to the heir of "all things" (Hebrews 1).

As unique as Jesus is, who alone is the Son of God, his Incarnation is an invitation – not an intimidation. God reveals his life to us so that it might be our light. As we prayed before the Gospel, "For today a great light has come upon the earth." And as we read in the Gospel, "What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race." In the Incarnation of the Word, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

Believe in this light. Let it illumine your every sin. Christ entered our sinful world to heal it, and to give meaning to the ugly drama we created.<sup>2</sup> Let his light illumine your every injury: let no sin against you be wasted, for they can all be illumined by Christ as occasions to enjoy unconditional love for God and neighbor. No matter the injury, our forgiveness and openness to reconcile is always possible. This is the promise of the child Jesus: that it can all be healed. The wood of the crib, and his infant cry of hunger: in the manger he anticipates his crucifixion, his absorption of all evil into himself for its own destruction. He conquers all evil by outflanking it: rather than meet it on its own terms, he lets it spend itself upon him in order to reveal a deeper love, and in this way he makes our very sinfulness and mortality an instrument of redemption – making the cross into the tree of life. Through our very poverty, through enduring in love the very failures that would otherwise dispirit us, he makes us whole. "All things" came to be through this Word: every injury you and I suffer, every disappointment and sin we bear – all this too can be integrated into his expression of eternal love. This is indeed, as we prayed, a "still more" wonderful restoration! And who will contradict him, to say this is undesirable? Why would we exclude any injury from his work?<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Don't be like an OCD underliner of books (like me), who cannot tolerate the slightly bent line but has to erase to rewrite the dash or underline so that it looks perfect. If we have that attitude toward our lives – that attitude of total control, of absolute intolerance for our mistakes – we have not given ourselves entirely over to Christ. He makes crooked ways straight (cf. Isaiah 45:2), so let us stop trying to erase and straighten ourselves on our own and in vain, but rather give ourselves to him for his work.

<sup>3</sup> The martyrs, like Franz Jägerstätter, can convince us that peace is always possible and happy: "God does not want us to be lost, but fortunately to be with him in eternity. If one has vindictiveness against no one and can forgive all people, if one dismisses an occasional harsh word, then one's heart remains at peace. There is nothing more beautiful in this

In the face of the trials of history, we need a light worthy of our courage and sacrifice. The light we are given is a life, a life that proves to us the dreams we have for absolute Truth and Goodness, for eternal peace and love, for a communion to reign over all creation – that all this can become a reality: it is possible to love purely, to be liberated from sin, to live in communion with God and neighbor. For that life is there, in a crib, inviting us to join him. Let us see everything transfigured by Christ, who illumines every experience, every aspect of our humanity, as a place for loving union with God and, in him, with all others.

This invitation is extended every day in faith, and sacramentally at every mass, where *the very living body of that baby* is extended to us in the Eucharist. We lay our lives on the altar, and he takes them to mingle them together with his own, water and wine together, as the principle of our lives. The greatness of his love proves itself able to embrace our weakness – remember this shoot sprouted from our stump, and he lived his life of love within our life of death, and he has emerged victorious on the other side. As a human being, he shows that the *greatness of our own love* can prove itself capable of bracing all our own weakness and those of our neighbors. What can we not forgive? What injury and suffering can we not endure? If we would only walk by this light. If there is any strife among family and friends, it is not necessary, for we have a hope that makes it possible to love in all moments.

---

world than peace.” (Putz, 110 [Letter of May 7, 1943, after arrival to Berlin]). The translator notes that this is the prison where Dietrich Bonhoeffer was incarcerated. Bonhoeffer told his family that the guards brutally treated the prisoners, especially during their first days at the prison – and thus what Jägerstätter says here should be read as a peaceful response to very harsh treatment. Again in another letter he counsels peace: “Be at peace! Let us love one another and readily forgive each other. Most people embitter their lives by their lack of reconciliation.” (Putz, 117 [Letter of June 6, 1943]).