

Christmas Day Sermon – Fr. Richard Wall

Today we celebrate the weakness of God. Few creatures are more helpless than a baby. The same God who created the oceans, the mountains and the night stars freely chose to become so weak.

This was done of no mere whim. God embraced our weakness for a reason. He desired to communicate to mankind his strength, his very life.

Few have ever appreciated this glorious weakness of God more profoundly than St Therese of Lisieux. Her mother died when she was only four and since Therese was the youngest of nine children, her father tended to spoil her. This made the young Therese hyper sensitive – at the slightest setback or criticism, she would burst into tears. If she even imagined someone was criticizing her, she would start to cry. Then she would cry again because she felt ashamed of crying! In spite of her extraordinary intelligence, it seemed like she would always be emotionally crippled. She prayed to Jesus, but there was no answer.

Finally on Christmas Eve 1886, when Therese was almost 14 years old, an answer came. Shortly after praying to the Infant Jesus, she overheard a comment by her dad. Normally it would have caused her to break down into tears. But she didn't. At that moment God made her more sensitive to her father's feelings than her own. This was the turning point in Therese's life. Here is how she described that moment in her autobiography:

“On that blessed night the sweet infant Jesus, scarcely an hour old, filled the darkness of my soul with floods of light. By becoming weak and little, for love of me, He made me strong and brave: He put His own weapons into my hands so that I went on from strength to strength, beginning, if I may say so, ‘to run as a giant.’”

The Holy Child, she said, had healed her of undue sensitiveness and “girded her with His weapons.” It was by reason of this vision that she became known as “Therese of the Child Jesus.”

Therese only lived another ten years. She died of tuberculosis at the age of 24 - but she became one of the most remarkable saints of modern times. Literally millions of people have read her Autobiography and have gained great encouragement from her example. St. Therese of the Child Jesus knew that God shows his greatest strength when human beings feel the weakest.

I don't know how many of you may have seen the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy at the cinema. Those of you familiar with the story may remember that the person chosen to carry the ring of power is not the strongest or most clever. No, he stands only three feet tall and his greatest ambition in life is to tend his garden – and to enjoy six or seven meals every day. He is a hobbit called Frodo. Upon him is the crushing burden – and the terrible temptation – of the ring.

J.R.R. Tolkien did not write the Lord of the Rings with an explicit Christian message. However, he was a devout Christian – and his Christian vision shines through the story. His vision was that God uses what seems most insignificant to achieve his purpose. So it was in the event we celebrate today – God's birth as a helpless baby in Bethlehem. So it is in the Mass we celebrate. God uses the most ordinary substances – bread and fermented grape juice – as the vehicles to communicate his divine life to us. It is at the moment when you feel most weary, most tempted, it is precisely then that God wishes to make known his love through you. St. Therese wrote:

*O blessed night
When the sweet infant Jesus
Scarcely an hour old
Overcomes the darkness of our souls
And floods them with his light.*

Saint John, in the beginning of his Gospel – which we heard just a moment ago- goes back beyond the infancy and childhood of Jesus, to creation itself.

John traces the origins of Jesus back to His Being with God. God speaks and the Word becomes flesh. The Son pitches his tent amongst us, he becomes flesh, takes human form. The divine Logos becomes personified; humanity and divinity are now conjoined. The stage is now set for reconciliation between God and man.

Aquinas is clear that The Incarnation does not concern the completing of creation, but, rather, this offering of forgiveness. But- and this is important- we should not think of The Incarnation as some temporary instrument of history, there to enable the act of redemption, now to be simply left behind. Now, for always in time, and so from eternity, human nature through Christ is directly impersonated by The Word, The Logos, in such a way that we can worship Christ's human appearance without idolatry. If Christ's humanity eternally subsists in The Logos then in some sense the world was created by and through this baby in Bethlehem. In some sense, then, the human offence which required this baby was always an offence against the incarnate one. In other words, we don't just rejoice because this baby redeems us, but simply because this baby is glorious and causes us to exalt.

The emphasis, in John's account, is not so much on the contrariness of God as on his dependability. God had promised and now God keeps his word, or rather speaks his Word and that speaking makes Him present amongst us. One of the greatest compliments that we can give to another human being is to say that they are people of their word. Today, we celebrate that God, "Filled with enduring love," kept his word to the creation he loves.

We often here complaints about how commercial Christmas is these days- or how tinsel and turkey has nothing to do with the “real meaning” of Christmas that we gather here today to celebrate.

Well, I’m not so sure. I rather think that the brightness, the colours, the presents, the happiness, the whole phantasmagoria of the Christmas season is our human way of commemorating and celebrating what God did for us in that stable all those years ago- an event which no amount of words could ever express.

We can tell the Christmas story over and over again, but all we can ever do in response is to show awe and wonder. Why would God want to take on our weakness, why would God become human?

There can only be one answer. That God loves us and that he does not want us to live in darkness. He became man like us in order to raise us to be with him forever. God became man to give us hope; a glorious hope that shines out through all the pain and suffering around us. God became man like us so that we could share what he is. This is the hope that we must proclaim to the world.

May God give you the grace to experience and pass on the wonder of the “Word made flesh”.