

CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY 2019

Isaiah 62: 1-5 + Acts of the Apostles 13: 16-17, 22-25 + Matthew 1: 1-25
Holy Spirit Catholic Church: 5 p.m. & Midnight, December 24, 2019

Many of you are probably wondering:
What happened to the traditional Christmas story?
What about there being no room in the inn for Mary and Joseph,
Jesus being born in a manger, and the angels declaring good news of great joy
to shepherds with the birth of the Savior?

That story of Christ's birth comes from the evangelist Luke,
but Matthew the evangelist brings his own perspective to the birth of the Son of God.
Since we have recently begun the Year of Matthew,
and Matthew's Gospel will be proclaimed almost every Sunday
between now and the end of next November, it is appropriate that this Christmas
we hear Matthew's infancy narrative.

Matthew begins his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus Christ,
who is not only Son of Mary but also son of the Father of faith, Abraham,
and the son of the greatest king Israel ever had, David.
Matthew shares with us the whole story by recalling Jesus' ancestors,
reminding us that the Son of God joins himself to the human family forever.

Jesus' family tree includes men and women, Jews and Gentiles, saints and sinners.
It includes four women who give birth to ancestors of Jesus in unusual
and sometimes scandalous circumstances, pointing to the most unusual birth of all—
His birth from a virgin.

There are a lot of skeletons in Jesus' family closet,
but God works through each of them to prepare the way for the coming of His Son.
The story of Jesus Christ is written with the crooked lines
of liars and betrayers and the immoral.

The evangelist Matthew is faithful to the Old Testament insight
that God frequently does not choose the best or the noblest or the saintly,
but still works with them and through them to advance his plan for salvation.
This "choosing" by God of imperfect and even sinful people to do His work
continues with the adult Jesus, as he preaches salvation to Matthew the tax collector

and other sinners excluded from the Temple worship,
calling them to be part of his merry band of followers.

The first part of the genealogy builds up from Father Abraham, who had no land but received a promise, to David, who rules as king in possession of that Promised Land. But the second part of the genealogy goes downhill from David, as kings follow him who lead the people away from God, and the eventual result is losing their land and being deported to Babylon.

King David himself was a remarkable combination of saint and sinner. He was not only the greatest king of Israel and a poet and a lover of God but also a murderer and a slave to his lusts. Yet, the sinner David and the corrupt kings who followed him are also part of the story of the origin of Jesus Christ.

Then the third part of the genealogy takes an upward swing with the joyful return from exile all the way to the birth of Christ. But what a curious cast of characters this progress involves. Except for Shealtiel and Zerubbabel, the first two, and the last two, Joseph and Mary, they are a collection of unknown people whose names never made it into the Bible, except for here.

Obviously, Abiud, Eliakim, Zadok and the rest never did anything significant, or they would have been mentioned in the sacred history of the Jewish people. But while powerful kings brought God's people to the low point of the exile to Babylon, unknown people, also saints and sinners, were the vehicles of restoration.

These who were considered "nobodies" to the rest of the world, carry on the lineage of Jesus' family tree, carry forward the long and winding story of Salvation!

Matthew's Gospel states that each of the 3 divisions in Jesus' genealogy has 14 generations, but if you actually count the generations, you would find there are only 13 generations in the 3rd and final list leading up to Jesus' birth. That is significant, because that means all of us since the birth of Jesus are the 14th generation, carrying forward God's plan of salvation. We are the 14th generation, descendants of the Son of God, sinners and saints who God has chosen and who God uses to bring the good news of His love to the world.

If the beginning of the story of Jesus Christ involved as many sinners as saints, so has the sequence, so has this 14th generation.

This includes Peter, who denied Jesus and Paul who persecuted him, and all the sinners and saints ever since, including us.

The God who wrote the beginnings with crooked lines also writes the sequence with crooked lines, and some of these lines are our own lives and witness.

If we think we are insignificant and unimportant, then Jesus' genealogy gives us hope about our destiny and the vital role we play in salvation history.

By stressing the all-powerful grace of God, the genealogy of Jesus Christ presents its greatest challenge to those who will accept only an idealized Jesus Christ whose story they would write only with straight lines and whose portrait they would paint only in pastel colors.

He is Emmanuel, God-with-us, not God-apart-from us nor God-over-us.

Out of love, the One who is without sin joined himself forever to sinful humanity.

He is born to die to save us from our sins and to invite us to enter into abundant life with Him in the here and now.

He becomes human so that we might become divine,

so that we might share divine life in and through Him by the power of His Spirit.

The story of Jesus' genealogy, the story of his life in Israel 2000 years ago,

the story of his life with us now, reveals that God's marvelous grace can work even with and through people like us.

God can take the crooked lines of our life and make them straight to heaven's gate.

For every saint has a past and every sinner a future.

Which is why the child of Mary is given the name of JESUS,

which means, "God saves," and Jesus indeed saves us from our sins and from the wages of sin, eternal death.

He reveals God with us, Emmanuel, by always saving us from our past and giving us a future bright with hope.

God is so humble He became one of us, one with us, Emmanuel.

God longs to be known, and in Jesus we know Him down to the freckles and the fingernails.

God is with us and making himself known in birthing and dying, in experiences of love and loneliness, fear and fidelity.

God shows God's humility by using us, frail and fragile and weak and even sinful, to carry forward to others the Good News of His love for us in Christ Jesus. Like Achim and Ruth, Rahab and Rehoboam, Tamar and Solomon, we are bearers of the mystery of God.

So, we really have no excuse for not bringing Christ to the world by our lives of joyful love.

Thus, our lives can give glory to the God, who has given us a share in His glory, as we wrap the gift of our lives around the prayer:

“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.”

Fr. Joseph A. Jacobi