December Reflections Christmas, 2016

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We celebrate Christmas this year in a country suffering from deep divisions exposed and intensified by the presidential election with its inflammatory rhetoric. Some of the division involves healthy differences between people of good will on political philosophy and public policy. There are other aspects of the divide which are more troubling: refusing to listen to other opinions; demonizing opponents; stereotyping individuals and groups; supporting partisan positions without considering the common good; demeaning those who are different; fomenting prejudice and hatred; and eliminating ethical and religious considerations from the public debate.

American citizens are responding to this polarization in diverse ways. Those who currently benefit from it have reasons to accept it as a viable way to maintain privilege. Some are disturbed, fearing they will be victims of prejudice and stereotyping. Others do not like the constant fighting but see no way of overcoming it. There are still others who find the edgy polarization distressing and are looking for ways to alleviate fears, to fight prejudice and to promote dialogue and collaboration on behalf of justice and peace.

Given this distressing and complex situation, Christians do well to reflect on Isaiah 9: 1-16, the first reading for the Mass on Christmas Eve. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” and they rejoice, as over an abundant harvest, because God has decimated their oppressors, smashing the yoke and the rod of their taskmaster. “For a child is born to us, a son is given to us” named Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace and “his dominion is just and forever peaceful,” allowing all people to enjoy an integrated, fulfilled, and harmonious life.

This remarkable prophecy creates a context for the familiar Christmas story according to Luke. Still living under an oppressive regime, now the Roman Empire, Israel continues to await the Messiah, a Son of David who will liberate them and establish peace on earth. Forced by a Roman census, Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary undertake the arduous trip from their hometown in Nazareth to Bethlehem, the city of David in Judea. With no room in the inn, Mary, without the comforting presence of female relatives and friends, gives birth in a stable and places her newborn son in a feeding trough for animals, symbolizing his future ministry of nourishing his people. An angel appears to nearby shepherds, the unwashed underclass of Jewish society, informing them of the birth of the awaited savior who is Christ and Lord—an event foreshadowing the mission of Jesus to the poor and marginalized. And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and declaring “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

In the birth of Jesus, the prophecy of Isaiah began a process of fulfillment. The Prince of Peace arrived in human history. The Son of God pitched his tent on our earth. Jesus of Nazareth became the human face of the Jewish ideal of “shalom,” the divine gift of peace grounded in the right ordering of relationships with God, self, the community and nature.

Over thirty years after his birth, Jesus began his public ministry, going about doing good and proclaiming the reign of God. He identified himself as the Servant who preaches the good news to the poor and proclaims liberty to the captives. He reminded people of God’s great mercy and the responsibility to share that gift with others. More than any spiritual teacher, Jesus understood the importance of forgiveness in creating healthy human communities. In the Lord’s Prayer he connected God’s forgiving of us with our forgiving of others. In his great sermon, he declared, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.” Jesus completed his earthly peacemaking mission by his death and resurrection, which unleashed the reconciling power of the Holy Spirit for all people at all times. In the resurrection appearances, Christ typically greeted the disciple who abandoned him with the comforting words: “Peace be with you,” implying that they should share this gift of peace with others.

Despite the over-commercialization of Christmas, we can imagine Christians experiencing something of the peace of this season. After attending Christmas Eve Mass together, a family enjoyed a deeper sense of solidarity throughout the busy activities of Christmas day that reminded them of what family life at its best could be. After hearing a Christmas homily on reconciliation, a couple who split their presidential vote had, for the first time, a civil conversation about their political views. After a joyful celebration of Christmas, a man called an estranged friend suggesting they have lunch and talk things over. After a pleasant Christmas party with colleagues at work, a woman vowed to do her part to extend the harmonious spirit throughout the year. Any such experiences call for prayers of gratitude to the Prince of Peace.

We can think of our liturgical celebration of Christmas as an invitation to participate in the peacemaking mission of Christ. Belief in the reality of the Incarnation grounds the ethical obligation to overcome strife and division by promoting harmony and communion. As Christians, we cannot simply accept inflammatory political rhetoric as the new normal. We must resist movements that foster bigotry and prejudice. Our initial instinct should be to oppose war: either as pacifists or on just war criteria. All Christians should join in opposition to nuclear war and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Moral principles should be part of any discussion of abrogating the Iran Nuclear Agreement.

Christian peacemaking is more effective when grounded in the proper ordering of fundamental human relationships. Our faith insists that all people are totally dependent on the gracious God. Any peace we know comes as a gift from the One who created us in love and judges us with mercy. Prayer, which is a form of truth telling, expresses and deepens our total dependence on the God who calls us to be peacemakers in our own setting.

Our effectiveness is also enhanced by being at peace with ourselves. We develop greater internal peace by growing spiritually in all the dimensions of our lives: physical, emotional, moral, intellectual and religious. Our efforts to put on the mind of the Prince of Peace are facilitated by attending to our health, managing our emotions, overcoming our vices, learning more about our faith and worshipping our God regularly.

By achieving greater personal integration, we can improve our efforts to be a peacemaker in our communal settings: family, work, neighborhood, parish, city, country and world. The peacemaking mission of Christ includes all people and extends to the whole world. As his followers, we look for opportunities to overcome strife and divisiveness and promote harmony and peace in all our spheres of influence. Our fractured, polarized country needs people, today more than ever, committed to building bridges, promoting civil discourse, finding common ground and collaborating on behalf of the common good.

Christmas can be magical, appealing to our best instincts and our highest ideals. The Christmas liturgy has a remarkable power to stir our emotions and stimulate reflection. Sometimes the Spirit seems palpable when families come to Mass in a harmonious mood, appreciate the beautiful decorations, sing the familiar hymns, recall the story of the birth of Jesus and receive communion in a spirt of thanksgiving. It is always possible to connect the liturgical celebration with the challenges of the real world. This year a people who walk in the darkness of a divisive polarization in our country have once again seen a great light by recalling that a son was born, the Prince of Peace, who continues to establish a vast kingdom forever peaceful. That marvelous ideal of peace on earth may elude our grasp, but it continues to inspire our best efforts to participate in the peacemaking mission of Christ to transform the polarization that threatens us into a community that unites us.