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**Christmas Liturgy: Reflecting on Christ, the Icon of God’s Glory**

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Christmas Mass provides us with a marvelous opportunity for a deep, joyful, spiritual experience. Worshiping together can remind us of our common bonds; singing traditional hymns can touch our hearts; hearing the familiar story of the birth of Jesus can remind us of the central truths of our faith; and receiving communion can bring us closer to Christ and strengthen us to follow his command to love our neighbor. Our challenge is to make the most of the Christmas liturgy, to participate wholeheartedly, appropriate its message and maintain its joyful, hopeful spirit.

As one way of trying to meet this challenge, let us reflect on the second reading assigned for the Christmas Day Mass from the Letter to the Hebrews 1:1-6. The great Catholic scripture scholar, Raymond Brown (1928-1998), called Hebrews “one of the most impressive works in the New Testament. Consciously rhetorical, carefully constructed, ably written in quality Greek, and passionately appreciative of Christ,” it offers an “exceptional number of unforgettable insights that have shaped subsequent Christianity.” Noting the common scholarly opinion that the Apostle Paul did not write Hebrews, Brown thinks it was likely written in the 80s by an unidentified author who addressed Christians with an interest in Jewish worship practices. It functions more like a homily or commentary than a letter addressed to a particular audience, which makes it a helpful guide for mining the riches of the Christmas liturgy.

The passage read at the Christmas Day Mass is from the very beginning of the book: “In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son.” This puts the birth of Jesus in the context of the Old Testament that portrays an ongoing dialogue between the ever faithful God and the chosen people. The baby born to Mary is greater than Abraham, the great model of faith. He is the new Moses who proclaims the New Law in his sermon on the Mount. He is wiser than Solomon and is the true Son of David who establishes a kingdom of justice and peace that lasts forever. As the first reading for the Christmas Night Mass puts it, he is the Messiah promised by Isaiah, the One named Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. He is the Light that shines on the people who walked in darkness and inhabited the land of gloom (Isaiah 9:1-6). The baby lying in a feeding trough for animals is our Savior who trains us “to reject Godless ways” and “to live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age” (Titus 2:11-14). Like Israel, God brought Jesus, a child refugee in Egypt, back to his homeland (Matt 2:13-15).

The opening verses of Hebrews remind us of the essential truth we celebrate on Christmas. God has spoken to us through the Son. Jesus, the son of Mary, is the Son of God. The baby born in a stable is the Word made flesh, God dwelling in our midst. The Christmas liturgy is the ritual celebration of this dogmatic truth, which the Church calls the “Incarnation.” Our celebration is joyful because it recalls the best of news. We are not alone on our earthly journey; Christ the God-man walks with us. Our God is not a remote observer of the human scene or a harsh judge, but a loving Father who sent his son to liberate and save us.

The Incarnation is not merely a wondrous event in the past, but an ongoing reality. Christ, who is now seated at the right hand of God, continues to divinize our world, to make all things potentially revelatory and to accompany us on our personal journey.

This broad understanding of the Incarnation can help us preserve something of the Christmas spirit throughout the year. Consciously recalled, it can move us to be more effective peacemakers in our families, more available to our friends, more helpful to the needy, more resolute in the struggle to respect truth and more hopeful in the face of the negativity threatening our country. The positive experience of the Christmas liturgy could encourage some persons to attend Mass more often, to participate more fully in the liturgy, and to find concrete ways of relating liturgy and everyday life.

In addition to proclaiming that Christ is God’s Son, the Letter to the Hebrews presents an exalted or high Christology. For God made Christ “heir of all things” and through him “created the universe.” God’s Son is the “refulgence” of God’s glory, “the very imprint of his being,” who “sustains all things by his mighty word.” Having accomplished the work of salvation, Christ “took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on High, as far superior to the angels.” The author is claiming the preeminence of Christ, the icon of God’s glory, over all other creatures, human and angelic. Reflecting descriptions of “Wisdom” in the Old Testament, the author proclaims the pre-existence of the Word made flesh, as does the Prologue to John’s Gospel read at the Christmas Day Mass. In the New Testament, there is a progression in identifying the divinity of Christ. Mark, the earliest Gospel written around 70, says nothing of the birth of Jesus, but starts with his public mission of exorcising demons and curing the sick, signs of his divinity that was finally confirmed by the centurion at the crucifixion of Jesus: “Truly this man was the Son of God” (15:39). Luke, who used Mark as his primary source, located the divinity of Christ at his conception, when the angel Gabriel informed Mary that her son will be called “the Son of the Most High.” Hebrews goes further back in time, portraying the Word, who will become man, present at the creation of the universe, with the ongoing mission of sustaining all things. Thus, we can say that the baby carried in Mary’s womb during the long, arduous and dangerous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was the pre-existing Word made flesh, the Son of God incarnate. The newborn in the feeding trough sustains the whole world, energizing all humanity by his mighty word.

On Christmas, the Letter to the Hebrews invites us to celebrate Christ as the “refulgence” of God’s glory or, as other translations put it, the “reflection” of divine glory. The theme of God’s glory appears in Luke’s familiar story of the birth of Jesus. An angel of the Lord appears to a group of lowly, socially marginalized shepherds, and “the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were struck with great fear.” After the angel announced the good news of great joy that “a savior has been born for you who is Christ the Lord,” a multitude of the heavenly host suddenly appeared saying, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” After the shepherds visited Mary, Joseph and the infant, the shepherds returned “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen (2:1-20). For Luke, the birth of Jesus in a stable is, paradoxically, a supreme manifestation of God’s glory and a most compelling reason for praising the divine majesty.

In the Old Testament, God manifested divine glory in liberating the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and caring for them as they wandered in the wilderness. When God delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, the divine glory appeared as a thick cloud covering the mountain top, accompanied by peals of thunder and lightning and a consuming fire (Ex 24:16-17).

As the Letter to the Hebrews suggests, the New Testament portrays Jesus as the one who reflects the glory of God to the world. The Apostle Paul sees the glory of God on the face of Christ (2Cor 4:6). Luke reports that Peter, John and James saw the glory of Jesus when he was transformed before them on the mountain (9:28-36). John the evangelist states that Jesus revealed his glory by changing water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana (2:11), by raising Lazarus to life (11:4) and especially by freely embracing his death on the cross, the hour of his own glorification (17:1-5). Through his miracles, exorcisms, teachings and his life as the “very imprint” of God’s being, Christ, the refulgence of his Father, revealed something of the glory, the majesty and the splendor of the God who remains ultimately mysterious, beyond all words and images. Jesus Christ is himself the icon of the Father’s glory and the reflection of divine glory in the world.

It is this profound truth that we celebrate at Christmas, even if we do not recognize it or name it. We know something of divine glory in our joyous celebration of the Christmas liturgy, which gladdens our heart, expands our imagination, stimulates our mind and sends us home with feelings of peace and joy.

At the same time, we know from experience how fragile and fleeting the Christmas spirit can be. For most of us, this is simply part of the inevitable rhythm of our spiritual journey. We can, however, do more to stay alert to ways, often subtle, Christ continues to reflect God’s glory in our everyday life. For example, Christ who identified himself with the hungry and thirsty, can help us see the compassionate God glorified in helping those in need. Christ, who cured the lepers, can help us see God’s glory manifested in persons who are different and banished to the margins. Christ, who liberated the captives, can help us see God glorified in our struggle to promote justice and peace in our world. Christ, who is present in the Eucharist, can help us see God glorified by our regular participation in the liturgy. On Christmas, as we celebrate the deepest truths of life, we join the angels in prayer: “Glory to God in the highest,” and we commit ourselves once again to radiating divine glory and peace on earth.