

From The Pastor

A blessed and Merry Christmas to each one of you. Although you are reading this on the fourth Sunday of Advent, it is only a few days before we celebrate the Lord's birth. As so often happens, the last Sunday of Advent runs immediately into Christmas Day. Are you ready? Have these few short weeks of Advent helped you to prepare your heart to realize in a fresh way the presence of God in yourself and through you to others?

The wonderful images of Christmas present us with the crèche and crib; newborn babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, with adoring parents, and barn animals nearby. The scene itself inspires faith and stirs religious sentiment for all that is good and promising in the world. Christmas is hope and new life as it dawns with the fulfillment of a Savior: the divine One who accepts human flesh that all might be reconciled in Him, so that we might find our peace with one another.

The Incarnation, as a theological expression of all we believe about God in Christ, is a mystery we will never fully realize this side of heaven. Yet, as distant and unreachable as it is, the truth of this reality constantly surrounds us. God is a transcendent mystery of love beyond our knowing. Yet this love is so immediately present to us that it is as if we know what we don't know. To know love is to know God. Rarely, but sometimes this love comes directly from God as an experience of grace, insight, healing, profound inner peace, or a complete reversal of a life course through conversion.

This is not the norm, nor the essential purpose of the Incarnation. The story of the Incarnation is not just a vague story about a baby who was God. It is a reality of divine expression that touches every cell and fabric of the created universe. The reality of the Incarnation is the experience and acceptance of God constantly in us and with us. This means that in a real and explicit way the Incarnation was not just a thirty-three year experience while Jesus lived in the flesh.

Christmas is valued around the world as an unparalleled time of giving and sharing. Perhaps what we like most about the season is that it allows us to be more freely open about our goodness, generosity, and sharing. Such goodness is in us all year, yet we tend to wait for Christmas to give it full permission to express itself. The generous spirit of giving so evident at Christmas is a tangible sign of the Incarnation. As God has so graciously gifted us with Himself in Christ, who now dwells in us, so do we en flesh and become the presence of God to one another. The Incarnation of God in Christ did not end with the feast of the Ascension. Christ remains in us and with us through the Holy Spirit so that we can be Christ for one another.

This is the Christian journey: to move beyond the infant child in the crib and embrace the adult Christ in ourselves and in each other. As we are well aware, this is not an easy task. It is much easier to love an infant child than it is to love a conscious adult who can resist and push us away. Infants do not often push away. They welcome, grasp, and embrace.

It is a challenging reality to admit and accept both the human and the divine about ourselves. We are not God and we are not Jesus. But we are human and we are filled with the divine light and love. That is the tension in us isn't it? We are so inclined to act in our human nature, yet the divine light of love in us calls us to a higher way of being. We prefer to be as self-sufficient as possible, yet there is a fierce desire in us to belong, to be accepted, and to be loved and valued. We are inclined to be selfish, but we also have the desire to share, include others, and to forgive those who have hurt us.

We hate to be vulnerable and we pride ourselves on being strong, in control and not taken advantage of. Yet, we frequently open ourselves to every kind of inconvenience, pain, and challenge to save, heal, and protect those given to us. We desire our comforts and secure ourselves in as many ways as we think necessary, and then we surrender our peace for the needs of others.

This is what the Incarnation means. While in union with Christ, we remain fully human. Yet, while fully human, we are filled with the Spirit and the life of the divine. When we pray, as we so often do at Mass and in other prayers: 'through Christ our Lord', we are praying through the Incarnation. We now are Christ incarnate for, and with, and through one another. When you ask God to bless and heal your sick aunt, but do not call or visit her, how is God going to touch and heal her. You must assist God in answering your prayer. You must be the incarnate presence of God to your aunt to assist in her healing, as well as anyone else the Lord puts in your path. When we pray 'through Christ our Lord', we are praying through the Incarnation of Jesus who is now dependent on our flesh as his own to be love and welcome and healing to one another.

You are the incarnate presence of God in the world, precious and glorious in God's sight. Rejoice in these days for your Savior has come. He is with you now, full of saving love. Will you be an instrument of that love for others?

Have a wonderful Christmas,
Father John Esper