

Homily for the
Solemnity of Christmas, Midnight Mass
Preached by Fr. Brendan Freeman
(December 25, 2005)

[Scripture Readings: Is 9:1-6; Ti 2:11-14; Lk 2:1-14]

There is an old saying, "If it ain't broke don't fix it". The earthiness of this saying leads me to believe it came from a wise old farmer. If it came from a university professor it might be, "If it is not broken do not repair it"! Whichever it is, we generally do not follow this bit of wisdom. I used to take perfectly good things apart as a child just to see how they worked. The problem was I couldn't get them back together. Usually the saying applies only to mechanical things, but in fact, it has been applied to all kinds of things from personal relationships to marriages to history. There is a thing called revisionist history. I imagine this to be something like taking history apart and putting it back together in a new and improved way. There are several new biographies of Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin and Alexander Hamilton. There seems to be no such thing as a definitive life of the great historical figures.

This is legitimate because historians are interpreters of the past. The facts are not enough, there has to be interpretation. History is just too complicated to offer one interpretation. It is made up of drama and struggle and wars and prosperity and impoverishment. It records good times and bad, sickness and health. It is a record that lends itself to many ways of being understood. How else could all these new books be printed?

This evening we heard readings from the dawn of history up to the writings of St. Paul. Thousands of years of history. How do we interpret it? One way is to know what kind of history we are talking about. The Scriptures are salvation history. The ultimate author is the Holy Spirit. What comes down to us are true historical events but their purpose is to give us the mind of God. These are words of God coming to us in human form. These words are proclaimed to us. They are not just read in the privacy of our homes or monastic cells. They are proclaimed in the assembly and we listen and receive the divine meaning of God's message. There is a mixture of the divine and the human in the proclamation. This can happen because of the feast we are celebrating tonight. The Incarnation—the Word becoming flesh. This is a true historical event but there is no way we can prove that the baby in the manger is true God and true man. That is an interpretation of faith. The leap from the historical event to the mind of God is the leap of faith. "Only faith can guarantee the blessing we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that are unseen," (Heb.11:1). Faith is the key that opens the door to the mystery of God. Faith compels us to see the continuity in all the history that leads up to Christ and further yet, in all that leads from Christ to this very hour.

One of the golden threads running through this history is that God loves the poor. The weak

poor and the strong poor. I would think that everyone gathered here this evening is among the strong poor. We are not destitute or impoverished but we do know our situation. We know that our life is very fragile, that it is, as the Psalmist says, "over like a sigh," (Ps.89:9). The meaning of our life is not found in ourselves. It is outside ourselves. To know this, to feel it, to experience it, is true poverty and thus precious to God.

So how does faith help us interpret the feast we are celebrating as recounted in the Gospel of Luke? One of the great features of this account is the poverty of it all. The child is born in utter poverty. There is no room in the inn. He is laid in a manger. Many of the Fathers of the Church make a connection between the birth of Christ and his death. The wood of the manger and the wood of the cross, the swaddling bands and the shroud. Item by item you might not be able to draw a direct comparison but to me the main similarity is the utter poverty of both events. This poorness makes both approachable. Christ's death was so shameful and humanly debased that no one's death needs be deemed shameful. His birth was so poor that no one need be afraid to approach the stable. That is the point. God humbled himself before us. God went to the depths of our weakness to win us over to his love. I remember seeing a scene from the life of Mother Teresa she was walking in the academic procession at a Harvard commencement. She looked so small and insignificant among the greats but in her poverty of appearance her inner authority stood out all the more.

True wisdom comes from true poverty of spirit. This means we know our place in the world. We know how utterly dependent on God we are. We know that life is a gift, that love is a gift, that Jesus is a gift from the heart of God. Underlying all the gift giving of Christmas there is the truth of God's humility; the gift of himself as a defenseless infant, the gift of himself as a falsely accused criminal dying that we might live. Infants are meant to be held. God wants to be held in our hearts and in our minds. He wants to be honored by the way we live and relate to others. He wants to make us his own. He has gone all out to show us his love and win our hearts.

It is the season of gift giving. Let us give the gift of ourselves to the one who gave himself up for us.