

## HOMILY CHRISTMAS 2003

The longer I live and the more Christmases I experience the more I find it to be a feast that raises all kinds of ambiguous feelings.

A certain amount of this ambiguity is created by the great commercialism that has come to characterize Christmas in our culture. Advertisements begin in mid-October to push an idealized picture of Christmas on us. You can have a perfect Christmas if you buy this or eat that or do the other thing. We see this “perfect Christmas” portrayed on TV or in movies, in commercials, on Christmas cards, and in Christmas carols. It is the “Currier & Ives” Christmas of softly falling snow, families gathered around a perfect Christmas tree exchanging presents and everyone getting what they want. And yet plan as we may it never turns out exactly like you planned it. It always involves some kind of confrontation between the “ideal” and the “real”, between what suppose to be and what really is.

Oftentimes the sadness or struggles of our lives interfere with our “perfect” Christmas. It may be the death of a loved one, illness, family tensions, the loss of a job, aging parents, children who reject faith or church or other values that are important to you, a family rift, financial instability or any other struggle of life. This year we have the precarious economy, the war in which so many of our brothers and sisters are being killed, the scandal and turmoil in the Church, an orange alert status and now mad cow disease to add to our “less than perfect” Christmas. And if the histrionic weather forecasters are to be believed our Christmas will be rainy rather than white this year. It just will not be what we planned. It will not be perfect.

Often too all the preparation and celebration either overwhelms us or tires us out. Then you hear people saying, “I just want to get through Christmas” or “I cannot wait until Christmas is over”.

Yes, there are lots of ambiguous feelings about Christmas.

Part of our ambiguity too may arise from a misunderstanding about what we

are actually celebrating. We may have a romanticized or idealized image of what the first Christmas was. Look at our manger scenes. Mary is usually a beautiful young woman dressed in a neat, color-coordinated outfit. Joseph is usually a strong, handsome man. The baby is portrayed as smiling with bright eyes and rosy cheeks. They are seen in a manger that is often neat and clean with some well-behaved animals. The shepherds who visit are neatly dressed with very white sheep.

But did you hear the story of the birth of Jesus in Luke's gospel that we just proclaimed? It was a bit different. This was a poor family displaced by the empire that held their homeland in captivity. They were pregnant and many people looked upon their pregnancy as suspect. They were forced to travel a great distance even as her due date approached. No one would give them a room so they were forced to go to a manger, a place where animals are kept and fed. It was probably cold, smelly and uncomfortable. It was an awkward place for the delivery of a baby. Imagine the possibility of infection! The shepherds about whom Luke tells us were poor wandering nomads. They lived in the fields and traveled to feed their sheep. And sheep are dirty animals.

Yes, the birth of Jesus was not as Mary and Joseph might have planned it. And yet in those less than perfect circumstances God is found. It is the greatest miracle of human history. God became someone like each of us except that he never sinned. Jesus was not an idea whose time had come or some fantasy figure we read about. Jesus is really God among us! Jesus is God present in unexpected and less than ideal circumstances. New life and new hope come in a less than perfect situation. Have you ever found that to be the case in your life?

It is precisely into this very human and less than perfect world that Jesus is born. The faith to which we are invited at Christmas is that God can and does come and is part of our less than perfect lives, in our less than perfect families, in our less than perfect Church, in our less than perfect nation, in our less than perfect world. Within the messiness and mystery of your life and mine God can be found. It is there that God chose to be born. It is there where God continues to choose to be born.

Like a baby Jesus does not force us to believe this truth or to follow him. God always though, like a baby, attracts us to himself. In the most unlikely circumstances of our lives Jesus invites us to be really surprised at what happens when we really take God seriously.

Perhaps one of our traditional Christmas carols says it best. "No ear can hear his coming, but in this world of sin where meek (read: free, open, honest and faithful) souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in."

May you discover this to be true once again this Christmas. Merry Christmas!