

Father THOMAS IDERGARD SJ
Homily for Christmas Mass at Midnight
2017-12-25
Isaiah 9:2-7; Ps 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14
St. Eugenia Catholic Church, Stockholm (English Mass)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Tonight we celebrate the beginning of the mystery of the Incarnation, when God, the eternal and transcendent, enters our finite world and becomes truly immanent in it to show us who he is, and whom each one of us can become. This very night, the Church, through which the Incarnation is made present everywhere and at any time, in our gospel reading, the “Christmas story”, makes the truth about God known through the Evangelist’s depiction of two different kings.

First, we have, in the opening lines, as it should be according to the rules of telling, the worldly king, Caesar Augustus, Roman Emperor and the world’s most powerful person. He commanded armies, fought battles, won, occupied territories and gave orders, above all that of a census. This was something that spoke volumes to ancient people; especially Jews recalling a controversial action of their own once king David. A census was the ultimate expression of power and control; a message in which the ruler said: “You all belong to me, therefore I want to know exactly where you are, and I don’t care if you disagree.” So far the Emperor.

But unexpectedly and quite against contemporary narration etiquette, our attention is moved to a simple couple, who doesn’t even get a place to sleep in the shabbiest motel in that village, where the man had his family roots and accordingly needed to go for the first part of the census.

And there the woman, our Blessed Virgin Mary, gives birth to a child who she wraps and, lacking other possibilities, lays in a manger where animals normally eat. We here see two powerful symbols of what will be the child’s mission: The *swaddling cloths* point at the funeral cloths he will be wrapped in after fulfilling his task to die for our sins, definitely taking away from them the last word. The *manger* is the Eucharistic altar where he, through his death and resurrection, will nourish us humans, by sin turned more into beasts, with the life giving and transforming bread of his body.

The little family then receives visitors; but not in the form of the rich, beautiful, popular and powerful. No, they are busy and haven’t bothered to read the signs of the times announcing the fulfilment of God’s promises. The visitors are instead shepherds whose status corresponds to the homeless of today. And they are invited by an angel declaring this poor, insignificant child to be the true king of the world. The references to “the town of David”, “Christ”, in Hebrew Messiah, and “the Lord”, directly tell faithful first century Jews that this is the realisation of the old prophecies, of which we heard one of the more well-known in our first reading from the prophet Isaiah, around 500 years earlier. Prophecies ensuring that God will intervene in a definite way to “rule the world”, and not only Israel, as our responsorial psalm, right in this prophetic tradition, stated.

In the angel's message lie three concepts that indeed speak to a wider audience of listeners than only to the Jewish people: "saviour" – "sotér" in Greek – peace – "oikuméne" – and "news of great joy" – "evangélion" – were all terms linked to the promises of the Roman Emperors; and if we think about it, of all kinds of succeeding rulers, also in our time. And we begin to understand the point: important values such as salvation, peace and joy can only be realised in their higher and true sense by the other king of the story: the defenceless child born in a stable cave in Bethlehem.

Like the shepherds, we tonight behold how the true king of the world looks: simple, humble, vulnerable and peaceful. A king who will establish an order, in many ways contrary to, and in all ways transcending, the orders created by the powerful of this world – including us contemporary citizens with voting and purchasing powers. A kingdom contrary to, and transcending the Roman Empire then; the media, ideologies, trends, loud opinions and powerful interests today, and whatever comes tomorrow.

This contrast and transcendence draw a straight line from Jesus's manger in Bethlehem to his cross on Calvary, i.e. to the throne he will finally ascend. Thus we see the true face of God's power. This is a power over matter that is absolute. If we can't believe in the Virgin birth and, later, the Resurrection of Jesus, we deny that matter would belong to God. And if matter wouldn't belong to God, God wouldn't be God. And we would have no hope. All sin, evil, darkness and deficiencies we see around us would have the last word.

But God's absolute power is a power turning all human ideals upside down. It is strong by becoming weak, so that we in our weakness can share in it. It liberates by becoming dependent, so that we can welcome it by our free will. It fights by loving and wins by suffering. Only this way, it can liberate us from the grip of the occupation power of sin that we let into our lives, causing eternal death. In order to carry out this liberation, God became a child in a manger in an out-of-the-way corner of the world – and not a prince in the imperial palace in Rome, i.e. a part of all that already existing and dominating.

So behold the true king: God entering matter; our reality, our everyday human circumstances. Turning them into occasions of divine revelation, grace and salvation. The king who meets us, calls us, wants to draw us to himself, and to transform us in our matter so that we by his grace can become what he is by his nature beyond space and time: partaking in the communion of love that is God. Thus, behold true love, sharing our circumstances to enable us "to give up [...] all our worldly ambitions", as we heard in our second reading tonight from St. Paul's letter to Titus – i.e. to give up, as basis for purpose and hope, the other king, Caesar Augustus and all his various successors, in all times and places; kings that of course can do good but unavoidably will vanish, as they ultimately are built upon our weaknesses, volatile inclinations, addictions and changing feelings.

Tonight we learn that there is only one way to express our desire to follow the eternal king who first showed his face as a baby boy in Bethlehem, by serving with him and as him, under his reign, dominated by his values – only one way to relate to the ultimate truth and love revealed to us: to fall down in worship and adoration.