

Christmas Day

In Advent of 1818 in the Austrian Empire town of Oberndorf a young Catholic priest, Father Joseph Mohr, asked the local organist, Francis Xavier Gruber, to compose a musical setting of a poem he had written two years earlier in another town, Mariapfarr. At a Christmas mass in Latin that year people sang “*Stille Nacht*” in German in a church named after St. Nicholas. Soon that hymn was sung in many parts of the Austrian Empire. Twenty years after the song’s humble debut, the Rainer Family Singers brought the piece on tour to the United States, where its popularity spread. In 1859 an Episcopal priest working in New York City, Rev. John Freeman Young, translated three of the six verses into English. That’s the version we still sing, one of the most popular Christmas carols of all time, “Silent Night,” two hundred years old today.

The tune is a kind of lullaby, fitting the image of a tender and mild infant in the arms of his mother, ‘round both of whom all is calm, all is bright on this silent night. The solitude, preciousness and quiet of that picture belies the stunning belief behind it, that our timeless God has appeared in time - among us as a child.

At this mass we hear the sublime prologue to the Gospel of Saint John - no angels, no shepherds, no Bethlehem, but rather a profound meditation on what that silent night means. John starts his gospel with the same words that open the entire bible: “In the beginning.” He is actually describing a time before the beginning. The Word, who was all that God was, yet distinct from God, coexisted with God from the beginning. Then God created the world and defined time. As things came into being, life became the light of the human race. At a particular time and place God’s word became flesh. The eternal God enters the world as one specific Person.

Into this meditation walks John the Baptist. Far from an intruder on the scene, John brings even more reality to the announcement. He testified to the light so that others might believe. It worked. The prologue of John’s Gospel moves us through three steps: the preexistence of God, the birth of the Word made flesh, and the results of this encounter between God and humanity.

Like John the Baptist, you and I have encountered God. John encountered the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth. We have encountered the risen Christ in our community, in our sacraments and in our hearts. Like John the Baptist, you and I now announce this Word - especially to those who dwell in the darkness of unbelief. During Advent, John the Baptist urged us to prepare a way for the Lord; at Christmas, we urge others to do the same.

In the days ahead, you will continue to see Christmas decorations in Catholic churches long after the lights disappear from city streets, businesses and homes. One of the enduring images of the beloved Christmas carol “Silent Night” is that in the night all is bright. As lights come down around us, let us continue to shine the light that is within us. When people see us, let them see the one in whom we believe, the one who existed before time began, the one who became flesh so that we could see his glory. In our thoughts, in our actions and in our words, in the songs we sing, let us be the light. Let us be the good news, the encouragement, and the guide. Let us be Christ.

Tuesday, December 25, 2018