

The Nativity of the Lord

I'm the third of six children in my family, so Christmas always brings back memories. We decorated our home, shopped for presents, anticipated the arrival of relatives, enjoyed the sweets of the season, sang carols at the piano, watched specials on TV, and, because we were kids, we also got into arguments and fought with each other. Whenever we asked Mom what she wanted for Christmas, she always responded with the same two words: "Good children."

It never escaped us that another child was coming into our home, the Christ child, and there would be no arguing or fighting with him. People sometimes get annoyed with children—kids are demanding and immature by nature. But they bring the light of love into a home and spontaneously evoke from parents, siblings and neighbors a desire to explore a new friendship and to share whatever we can. Every child tantalizingly conceals his or her future. At every birth we ask the wondrous question, "What will this child be?"

That question floated around the birth of Jesus, given the extraordinary circumstances of his conception and the gathering of creatures as lofty as angels, as ordinary as shepherds, and as dull as animals. Everyone wondered, "What will this child be?"

To grasp the answer to that question, we sing verses from Psalm 96 as the responsorial to the readings on Christmas Eve. This hymn peals out in joy the wonders God has done, and it embraces the duty to tell all other people about them. Written long before the birth of Jesus, this psalm proclaims praise for God's mighty deeds and anticipates the coming of the Lord to accomplish even more of them. We heard our cantor sing, "He comes to rule the earth. He shall rule the world with justice and the peoples with constancy."

To help us Christians interpret this ancient Jewish prayer, we sang a refrain taken from the message of the angel in Luke's gospel: "Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord." The one whom the psalm believed was coming in the future to rule the earth has indeed come. He came as an infant. What will this child be? Lord over all the earth. Christ, the anointed one. He will rule not in corruption but with justice.

The arrival of any new child changes a family for the good. But sometimes a new child makes siblings envious, wears parents down, and disturbs neighbors endlessly. In our pride, we focus so much on self-improvement and self-care that we may succumb to irritation and anger in the presence of a child. It isn't the kid's fault; the child is just being a child. Unique to the birth of Jesus is one more revelation the angel made about his role: Jesus is Savior. The very name "Jesus" means "Savior". He was born to save us from our sins, even the ones we commit in the presence of kids, failing to return an example of the light of love.

In the birth of Jesus, we are all like children welcoming another sibling into the family. What will this child be? The ruler of us all. If we listen to his words commanding love, if we follow his example of service, if we sacrifice for others even to the point of suffering, we will become the best Christmas present: good children.

Saturday, December 24, 2022