

There is something about the routines of Christmas that tie year to year and generation to generation. I certainly get that sense when I see candlelit faces young and old standing outside the church singing Silent Night. Take away the cell phones and the street lights and you could almost be standing outside the church in Oberndorf, Austria back in 1818 when to compensate for a broken pipe organ the priest and the organist came up with a Christmas Carol that could be played on the guitar Stille Nacht Heilige Nacht.

In Vermont we always ended with candlelight and Silent Night, although there was no tradition of doing it outside. It was a bit too nippy up there. I can remember one Christmas Eve it must have been 15 or 20 below zero and the sound of the snow underfoot as I walked home from church was a peculiar squeak you only get that those frigid temperatures.

Coming home from church after your children are grown is certainly different than when they were little - no 12 hundred piece Barbie dream house to put together starting at midnight while knowing there would be footsteps on the stairs at the first light of dawn. But one tradition that I picked up from my parents and have continued through all the years is to mix a tasty libation and turn on Christmas Eve Mass from the Vatican.

I don't know how many people are in the television audience for the mass, but I have to think it's in the millions. And even though it's about as far away as you could get from our little group gathered on the Green with candles singing Silent Night it is essentially a thread of the same garment of worship that wraps around the world on Christmas Eve.

For many years I could only listen out of one ear because God help you if you leave out step 27b and have an extra part when you're putting the roof on Barbie's dream house. But now I can pay attention, and I have to say I thought that this year the Pope gave a most worthy homily. I kind of expect the Pope to give a pronouncement more than a sermon, but this Pope, Pope Benedict, whatever other judgments people may make about him, is a scholar, and in his sermon he made used reasoned arguments about scripture and history to speak a message was right on target for Christians of all denominations and traditions.

The Pope began with a reference from St. Paul: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all," (Titus 2:11, NRSV) He said: Formerly, people had spoken of God and formed human images of him in all sorts of different ways. But now something new has happened: he has appeared. He has revealed himself. He has emerged from the inaccessible light in which he dwells. He himself has come into our midst. This was the great joy of Christmas for the early Church: God has appeared. No longer is he merely an idea, no longer do we have to form a picture of him on the basis of mere words. He has "appeared".

But now we ask: how has he appeared? Who is he in reality? The reading goes on to say: "the kindness and love of God our Savior for all humanity was revealed" (Tit 3:4).

For the people of pre-Christian times, whose response to the terrors and contradictions of the world was to fear that God himself might not be good either, that he too might well be cruel and arbitrary, this was a real "epiphany", the great light that has appeared to us: God is pure goodness.

Today too, people are asking whether the ultimate power that underpins and sustains the world is truly good, or whether evil is just as powerful and primordial as the good and the beautiful which we encounter in radiant moments in our world. "The kindness and love of God our Savior were revealed": this is the new, consoling certainty that is granted to us at Christmas.

Then the Pope turned to the very same passage from the Prophet Isaiah that we had just read when we lit our candles on Christmas Eve- "A child is born for us, a son given to us and dominion is laid on his shoulders; and this is the name they give him: Wonder-Counselor, Mighty-God, Everlasting-Father, Prince-of-Peace. (Is 9:5f.).

Whether the prophet had a particular child in mind, born during his own period of history, we do not know. But it seems impossible. This is the only text in the Old Testament in which it is said of a child, of a human being: his name will be Mighty-God, Everlasting-Father.

We are presented with a vision that extends far beyond the historical moment into the mysterious, into the future. A child, in all its weakness, is Mighty God. A child, in all its neediness and dependence, is Eternal Father. And his peace "has no end".

The prophet had previously described the child as "a great light" and had said of the peace he would usher in that the rod of the oppressor, the footgear of battle, every cloak rolled in blood would be burned (Is 9:1, 3-4).

God has appeared - as a child. It is in this guise that he pits himself against all violence and brings a message that is peace. At this hour, when the world is continually threatened by violence in so many places and in so many different ways, when over and over again there are oppressors' rods and bloodstained cloaks, we cry out to the Lord: O God. In this time of ours, in this world of ours, cause the oppressors' rods, the cloaks rolled in blood and the footgear of battle to be burned, so that your peace may triumph - for your law is love and your Gospel is Peace.

In the last part of his sermon the Pope spoke about the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. I know some of you have toured in the Holy Land and probably remember this church - or others may have seen it in the news this past week under the sorry headline The Battle of Bethlehem - the story read:

An extraordinary brawl between clergymen broke out at the very site where Jesus is said to have been born. The annual cleaning of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem descended into a battle between the rival Christian denominations that share it. Brooms, fists and vicious insults flew in

all directions between 100 priests and monks dressed in their traditional robes. The fight ended only after Palestinian police, bending their heads to squeeze through the church's low 'door of humility', rushed in with batons to restore order. The row is believed to have begun after a clergyman of one order - either Greek Orthodox or Armenian Apostolic - accidentally pushed his broom into space controlled by the other group.

Certainly there is a lesson there in how not to honor the birthplace of the Prince of Peace.

But that had not happened at the time of the Pope's sermon, and he focused more on the small entrance doorway that is mentioned in the article and that every visitor must pass through in order to enter the church.

The Pope noted that the original doorway which was twenty feet high and through it emperors and caliphs used to enter the building - but now it is walled up. Only a low opening of under five feet tall has remained. The intention was probably to provide the church with better protection from attack, but above all to prevent people from entering God's house on horseback. Anyone wishing to enter the place of Jesus' birth has to bend down.

It seems a deeper truth is revealed here, said the Pope, which should touch our hearts: If we want to find the God who appeared as a child, then we must dismount from the high horse of our "enlightened" reason. We must set aside our false certainties, our intellectual pride, which prevents us from recognizing God's closeness. We must follow the path leading to inward simplicity which enables the heart to see.

We must bend down, spiritually we must as it were go on foot, in order to pass through the portal of faith and encounter the God who is so different from our prejudices and opinions - the God who conceals himself in the humility of a newborn baby.

So this morning, January 1, 2012, as we begin a new year let us hold in faith the Good News of Christmas, let us, like Simeon in the Temple, receive the gift of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and join with him in a song of thanksgiving

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

And let us also pray for all who face this year in poverty, in suffering, as migrants, that a ray of God's kindness may shine upon them, that they - and we - may be touched by the kindness that God chose to bring into the world through the birth of his Son in a stable.