

Homily for Christmas, 2008

There are good things going on in our world.

It has taken decades of research and years of experimentation but doctors can now use lasers to treat some eyesight defects. Operations that were too delicate for the scalpel or too risky to attempt by other means can now be performed successfully. We are only beginning to explore the benefits that lasers can bring to humankind.

But there are evil things going on in our world as well. We are also developing the use of lasers as weapons. Laser-guided missiles have done great damage in the two Gulf wars. There is a debate going on which centers on the use of lasers in battle to blind enemy soldiers.

This is the human situation. Intellect, scientific prowess, natural resources, and ideology are being used for diametrically opposed ends — to restore sight and to destroy it.

From the beginning, we have struggled with the impulses to **create** and to **destroy**. Every positive, life-enhancing development seems to balance a negative, life-threatening development. But it also seems that every destructive impulse counters a creative one.

Is this battle between good and evil destined to last for ever? Or is the battle destined to be won by one side or the other? Will evil be wholly banished, or will the world and all its people be destroyed by some monstrous creation of humankind's intellect?

To explain the significance of the birth of Christ, the early theologians of the Church suggested that humanity was like a body without a head. People had life, Societies

were capable of action, but humankind lacked leadership and a sense of its own purpose and direction.

With the birth of Christ the body gained its head. In Christ, humanity found its guiding principle, its leader and its moral authority. In Christ, the continuing battle between darkness and light entered a new and final phase. The vicious circle that seemed impossible to break has been smashed by the intervention of God.

Isaiah spells this out in his prediction of the coming of the Messiah. **"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."** That darkness is as evident as it ever was. It lives wherever people are in captivity of body, mind, or spirit. It thrives where injustice, violence, and ignorance dwell.

Sin is so often misunderstood by our culture. Some people think that money is bad, and that wealth is sinful. But wealth is not sinful. It is only greed and selfishness that are sinful.

Sin is the darkness that prevents us from seeing the good that the gifts from God give us power to accomplish.

People say that power is sinful but power can be used to marshal the energies of a society or a nation to doing great good or it can be used to dominate and enslave others. Power is not sinful. The choice to use power to serve darkness rather than light is sinful.

Some people think that sex is a sin, but it is not sex that is a sin, it is the misuse of sex. Using sex to control or use another person is sinful. Sex in the context of love and commitment, sex as a mutual self gift is a reflection of God's love.

Sin is the misuse of the good things that God has given us. God's gifts are misused when we walk in darkness and cannot see the power for good which those gifts possess. Darkness can rule the human heart and dark hearts can rule the world. But with the birth of Jesus Christ, judgment has been pronounced on darkness, light has shone, and the darkness **will** give way.

The events in Bethlehem two thousand years ago are history, in the sense that they really took place. And they are salvation, because they have changed humanity's understanding of what is right and what is evil in the world to this day.

For a body to flourish, grow, and mature, it requires its head. For humanity to flourish and grow it needs its head. From the ranks of humanity, one human person was born who completed God's creative plan and became the light and the heart of humanity.

The angel's first words to the shepherds are: "Do not be afraid." They are the same words used by the angel Gabriel when Mary is startled by his greeting. And Jesus uses them again and again during his public life. They are the words spoken to us tonight. **Do not be afraid.**

At the heart of the gospel message is the awareness that fear is a strong toxic to the human heart. We are afraid of violence, afraid of loneliness, and afraid of death. **The Gospel responds to this fear by placing a little child in our midst.**

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was all about putting an end to the universe' struggle between good and evil. In Jesus, we see in human form God's good news for humanity. That struggle has already been won, it no longer

depends on a culture or a society, because now that struggle is played out in the arena of the human heart, and each of us is asked to choose the light or the darkness. It is a fearful choice, because it is a choice for eternity.

In the birth of that little child and His presence among us we see the sign that there is a greater power than our fears. With his birth the light pushes back the shadows of darkness; his peace replaces violence, hatred, injustice, and war.

On this sacred (day) night, we know that the birth of the Christ-child in our midst is not the instantaneous solution to all human ills, but Christ is now the head of the body, leading humanity back to the Father. In the words of Saint Paul; "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all".

Let us recognize this, let us believe this, and let us rejoice in this.

No one is excluded from his invitation. The joy he brings is for all the people, no matter how sinful we may feel ourselves to be, no matter how full of anxiety and doubt. Tonight (today) we are asked to let the darkness in our lives disperse, let go of our fears and rejoice in the birth of the child Jesus who brings salvation, who lifts us from fear, and who gives our lives purpose and meaning.