

Holy Family Sunday

The other day a father of several children remarked: “Christmas used to come as a complete surprise to me every year.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I was never ready for Christmas financially. I guess I knew it was coming, but I never saved anything up so that it didn’t wipe me out financially.”

“It is not a surprise anymore?”

“No. Several years ago, I learned to set aside enough each month so that when Christmas came I was ready.”

What that father was saying is that there is a difference between having an experience and learning from an experience. Have you ever had a teacher who had twenty years of good, accrued experience? Have you ever had a teacher who had one year experience twenty times? What a difference.

Some people have a fresh new experience with Christmas every year. Others have one experience with Christmas many times. They never learn anything from Christmas; they never take Christmas with them into the rest of the year.

The Scripture passages this week speak to me of taking Christmas with you as you live the everydayness of your life. They point to three ways in which you can decide to take Christmas with you.

You can decide to take Christmas within yourself. Joseph must have had a difficult time with that first Christmas. Mystified, confused, wondering what it all meant. At first the messenger of God had come to say that the pregnancy was of the Holy Spirit. Then, he returned later to say that Joseph should take his young family and escape to Egypt. Can you imagine what must have been going through his mind?

But Joseph was obviously a sensitive person. He had learned to listen to that still, small voice which speaks from God. He had learned to follow God's leadership. So, when God acted in history to bring about the birth of Jesus, Joseph took the truth within himself. When God spoke in the dream to warn Joseph of potential danger, Joseph followed God's leadership.

Such is one of the keys to taking Christmas with you to follow God's leadership. Not just noticing that God acts; but responding to the action. To get involved in what God is doing in the world.

What a beautiful blend of trust and action we see in Joseph. With this blend, he takes Christmas with him into the crises of his everyday life.

You can decide to take Christmas with you into your world. Saint Paul provides excellent leadership in his letter to the church at Colossae regarding taking Christmas with us into our world. He offers both a perspective and an approach.

The perspective is: live your lives in full awareness that you are the chosen of God. He does not use the word chosen to imply that his listeners should relate to God as though they were like the spoiled favorite son of an indulgent father. He is saying: live your daily lives out of an awareness that the God who became incarnate in his Son has also chosen you in grace to be his successor.

If we live our lives fully aware that the good news of incarnation is also the good news of God's parenthood for us, life has a totally different perspective. Christmas and its spirit become a part of every day, not just part of a holy day.

You can decide to take Christmas with you into your family. Many interpreters of Saint Paul miss the mutuality in what he says to first century Christians about family life. The key word in what he says here is mutual. He is not setting parent over child or husband over wife nearly so much as he is setting all under Christ in mutual self-giving.

This is the spirit of Christmas; mutual self-giving. “God so loved the world that he gave his Only Begotten Son.” Christmas spreads out into the rest of the year when we adopt this Christian attitude of self-giving into our families. For husbands and wives, he calls for mutual respect. The heart of respect is appropriate value. When we recognize that each partner in a marriage is just as valuable as the other partner, when we treat each other in marriage out of the awareness that she is as valuable as I, he is as valuable as I; the spirit of Christmas is translated out of a yearly observance into a daily celebration. The good news is that God has given each of us basic value which is not determined by our role or our position or our productivity. The value is God’s basic and finest gift to the human being. Such value, Paul says, is the basis of Christian marriage.

In dealing with children, Paul’s word of leadership is: approach your children as being as valuable as you are; combine discipline and encouragement into your daily dealings with them, and you will find that Christmas carries over into life. Give them what one author calls “the gift of delight.” All year long let them know they matter the way you do at Christmas, and they will respond with the sort of love you have initiated.

What will Christmas be for us this year? Just another round of a somewhat meaningful festivity, which soon turns into the bill paying and house cleaning, which seem to be such eternal parts of holidays, or will Christmas provide us with an opportunity this year to make some decisions about carrying it over into the newness of another year? Will Christmas this year be allowed to impact the way we relate to ourselves, our world, and our family? **Amen.**