

Christmas Day
December 25, 2013
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 1:1-18

We read in our Gospel this morning that “[Jesus] came to His own home, and his own people received him not.” Naturally, this brings to mind the incident in Nazareth, when Jesus told the people with whom He had grown up that the words of the prophets pointed to Him. The people of His hometown dismissed Jesus as the carpenter’s son, and when Jesus reproved them for the condescension, they tried to throw Him off the brow of the hill on which Nazareth is built. Though He escaped from their hands, their intention would be fulfilled later in the crucifixion, yet another example of how Jesus’ own people received Him not.

But today is Christmas, when we celebrate Jesus’ birth. We must consider another time, besides Nazareth and besides Calvary, when Jesus’ own people received Him not. If you were here last night, you heard the genealogy of Jesus Christ, how He was descended from David through His foster father, Joseph. Remember that Joseph had to go to Bethlehem because he would be registered for the census in the city of his father. Thus, even though Jesus grew up in Nazareth, his family was from Bethlehem. And what happened to Jesus the first time He went to the city of His father? In the womb of His mother Mary, there was no place for Him in the inn; and Mary delivered her Son in a stable and laid Him in a manger, the animals’ feeding trough. Jesus’ rejection by His own people, therefore, began well before Nazareth, well before Calvary.

And it did not stop at there being no place for Him in the inn. Remember the feast we will celebrate in three days, the Holy Innocents, the children under two years of age whom Herod killed because he considered the newborn king a threat to his rule. That time Jesus had to be taken to Egypt by His parents so He could escape the men who ostensibly reigned over Judea. And even when Herod died, Jesus could not go to Bethlehem, because Herod’s son, the new king of the Jews, was just as brutal as his father. He ended up in Galilee, what faithful Jews called “the land of darkness,” because it was half-pagan and so close to the land of the Samaritans. To be safe, Jesus had to settle amongst people that were not His own.

All this rejection, all this failure to receive the Lord Who was then our flesh and blood, and Jesus came anyway. You see, St. John the Evangelist not only reminds us that Jesus’ own people received Him not, he also emphasizes Jesus’ eternal pre-existence. That is, Jesus did not come to be when He was conceived of the Holy Spirit in the womb of His mother Mary. He existed eternally: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” There is no infancy narrative in John because he wants to emphasize this reality, that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, the Word of God, no mere mortal, but the God man, Whose death redeems us from our sins.

Since He is the Son of God, He knew beforehand the sort of reception He would receive from His own people. He knew that there would be no place for Him in the inn, that He’d be born in a stable and have a manger for a bed. Jesus knew before the Annunciation that Herod would try to kill Him, and He knew He wouldn’t be able to live in Bethlehem because of Archelaus. He knew the people of Nazareth would try to kill Him, also, and that the Romans would crucify Him after He was handed over to Pontius Pilate by His own people. In His omniscience, because He is the same yesterday, today, and forever,

Jesus knew what trials awaited Him when He came to earth, when He “became flesh and dwelt among us.” And He came anyway.

In other words, the sins that Jesus foreknew did not prevent Him from coming to earth to redeem us. Indeed these very sins are the reason He came to earth, because we are sorely in need of redemption, and He loves us so much that He does not want us to wallow in sin forever or suffer the just reward for our rejection of God. As St. John tells us in chapter 3, verse 16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

This great love, knowing He would be rejected and coming anyway, is the model for the love we are called to model for the world. In the end it was this love that saved so many of the people who initially rejected Jesus. We know that a good number of His relatives in Nazareth later became His disciples, and the very men who handed Jesus over to the Romans were not impervious to God’s grace either. After Pentecost, St. Luke tells us in the book of Acts, a number of the priests in the Temple became obedient to the Faith. Jesus saved the people who rejected and condemned Him.

When we consider the history of the Catholic Church and the thousands upon thousands of missionaries who have been martyred for proclaiming the Gospel, we see how many Christians have lived out this love, knowing full well they would be rejected and going out into the mission field anyway. Their love for Jesus and their fellow man has not deterred them from doing precisely what Jesus did first—loving those who would not love Him, in the expectation that they would come to love after they saw the magnitude of God’s love in action.

We learn thus that one message of Christmas is that we cannot live in fear of rejection. The possibility that our overtures will not be received cannot be grounds for failing to reach out. Jesus told us to expect to be rejected, and He spoke as one who had been rejected. But He also promised to give us the grace that would allow us to be light in the midst of darkness. He promised to be with us to the close of the age.

So if you have been paralyzed for fear that your good will and kindness will be rejected, Christmas is the time to remember that such fears did not stop the Word of God, and we have our salvation to show for it. You may well be rejected, but your love for those who need to be converted is stronger than their hatred of you; and your persistence in the Faith, no matter the trials, will convince at least some of your adversaries that love is stronger than death. Rejection, after all, did not have the last word. Jesus’ willingness to risk rejection, suffer it, and persevere issued in our acceptance of His invitation. We must expect, as instruments of His grace, that we will experience the same triumph.