

COLUMNISTS

Christ taught by example, not doctrine

The Word of God became flesh in order to "make his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). He came into our midst not to bring us a collection of doctrines to which we must give intellectual assent but to enter into personal communion with us.

Thus, when the disciples of John the Baptist sought out Jesus to determine whether he was the one who was to come, Jesus said to them: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Matthew 11:4-5).

Jesus disclosed himself not primarily through carefully formulated teachings, but through acts of ministry toward those in need of healing and compassion.

To be sure, there is, and has always been, a strongly doctrinal dimension to Christian faith. Anyone with even a vague familiarity with the history of the church knows that, from its beginnings, there have been theological controversies about every major element of belief and practice: the mystery of the triune God, Jesus Christ, the redemption, the effect of grace on human nature, the efficacy of the sacraments, and the authority of the pope.

But when Jesus himself taught, he did so primarily by deeds and by example.



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

When he did teach by word, his teachings were concrete rather than abstract. They were embodied in stories, or parables, drawn from real life and from the real human relationships that constitute real life.

Thus, when Jesus sought to teach his fellow Israelites that God's goodness and saving activity can also be manifested in those not belonging to the Chosen People, he did not initiate a heady theological discussion about the universality of salvation. Instead, he told a story — the story of the Good Samaritan.

In that story, a man who fell among robbers was ignored on the roadside by two members of the Jewish religious establishment. The only person who stopped to render assistance was a Samaritan — for the Israelites the most despised of individuals.

The hard teaching that Jesus commu-

nicated through that parable was not that whoever helps a person in need is a neighbor to that person, but that even the thoroughly despised can be more effective instruments of God's love and mercy than the Chosen People themselves (Jews and Christians alike).

When Jesus sought to teach his listeners about putting life's priorities in order, he did not offer a seminar on estate planning or lay out a conservative investment strategy.

He told a simple story about a rich man who had produced a great harvest and then, without taking account of life's fragility and unpredictability, tore down all of his barns in order to build larger ones. He died that very night.

To whom will all these riches now belong, Jesus asked his listeners. "Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God" (Luke 12:21).

And when Jesus attempted to teach his fellow dinner guests at the home of one of the leading Pharisees about the nature of eternal life, he did not initiate a rarified discussion about how the soul might live apart from the body, nor did he speak of the "light of glory" (Latin, *lumen gloriae*) which makes it possible for the soul to see God face to face in the Beatific Vision (another term he surely did not use).

Instead, he spoke of heaven as a great feast — a dinner like the one he and his fellow guests were having together in which friends and loved ones gather to celebrate and to give thanks for their wondrous blessings.

But it is more than a great dinner. The heavenly banquet is open to all, especially to those whom the more pious and religious among us might regard as totally unworthy of being invited. Indeed, the self-righteous will forfeit their own invitations, and their places will be taken by "the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Luke 14:21).

At Christmas we celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation, whereby the Word of God came "to make his dwelling among us." As such, it is a perennially fitting time to renew our commitment not so much to the strengthening of our beliefs, but to the strengthening of our relationships.

Like the Word of God, we are to make our dwelling in the midst of one another, healing those relationships that have been broken by injustice, and reinforcing others weakened by selfishness and indifference. For we are called to love "not in word or speech but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:18).

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Christmas traditions hold much meaning

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 1:39-45. (R1) Micah 5:1-4. (R2) Hebrews 10:5-10.

This Sunday is the last of the Advent season: the Sunday before Christmas. The Gospel story of the visitation is so fitting since Christmas celebrates God's visitation to earth.

Christmas is more than a day at the end of the year: it is more than a day of joy and good cheer. Christmas is really God's pattern for living, to be followed each day by unselfish giving. Then peace on earth will come to stay, when we have lived Christmas every day.

Every day should be Christmas. Why should we be happy and merry for only one day in the year? We should be joyful and merry every day of the year!

Why should we be kind and thoughtful for only one day in the year? We should be kind and thoughtful every day!

Why should we share and give to others for only one day in the year? We should share and give to others every day! Why should we go to Mass with our families just on Christmas? We should go to Mass with our families on Sundays, and when possible during the days of the week. We owe God thanks for all his blessings especially for his Son.

A real danger in our secularistic society today is to eclipse the real meaning of Christmas.

Parents should promote such traditions as the creche and the Christmas carols,



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

but they should also explain to their children the significance of the symbols of Christmas.

The Christmas tree is an evergreen (it does not shed its leaves, does not die) and so symbolizes the everlasting life that Jesus came to earth to give us.

The Christmas candle symbolizes Jesus, the light of the world, and reminds us of the candle given us at baptism, calling us to become lights in a world seated in the darkness of sin and error.

The star recalls the star of Bethlehem that led wise men to the manger.

Christmas bells — a bell alerts us to important happenings. School bells call to class. Church bells call to worship. Christmas bells call us to adore the newborn King.

Santa Claus is Santa Nicolaus, Saint Nicholas, known as bishop of Bari, Italy, though actually bishop of Myra in Asia Minor, renowned for his habit of giving

gifts secretly to the poor.

The Christmas wreath recalls the crown given to winners in a race or military victory. Crowned, they were paraded through the streets. When Jesus was crowned with thorns and paraded through the streets to the cross, he won victory over sin and death for us all. The holly with its red berries conveys the same message: victory through the blood of the cross.

The candy cane reminds us of the shepherd's crooked staff. They were the first to visit the newborn Babe. Upside-down the candy cane is the first letter for the name Jesus.

The Christmas colors are red and green. Red symbolizes the blood the Babe shed to give us the green of hope.

The poinsettia is distinctly modern and American. Dr. Joel Poinsett, an ambassador to Mexico (1836), discovered the plant there. He cultivated it; and, because of its colors and availability at this season, it has become a Christmas decoration.

Christmas ornaments decorating the Christmas tree was an old European custom. The ornaments were cookies and bread — a thanks to God for our daily bread. The cookies were a special treat for children. Now the decorations are glass and tinsel. But the tradition of edible decorations still endures when we give and share Christmas breads and cookies with relatives and friends.

So we wish you a "Merry Christmas." Christmas comes from two Latin words: "Christus" and "missus," which mean "Christ is sent" — sent by a loving Father as his greatest gift to his children.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, December 22
1 Samuel 1:24-28; Luke 1:46-56

Tuesday, December 23
Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24; Luke 1:57-66

Wednesday, December 24
2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16;
Luke 1:67-79

Vigil of Christmas: Isaiah 62:1-5;
Acts 13:16-17, 22-25;
Matthew 1:1-25 or 1:18-25

Thursday, December 25
Night: Isaiah 9:1-6;
Timothy 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14
Dawn: Isaiah 62:11-12;
Timothy 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20

Day: Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6;
John 1:1-18 or 1:1-5, 9-14

Friday, December 26
Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-59;
Matthew 10:17-22

Saturday, December 27
1 John 1:1-4; John 20:2-8

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