

Christmas has a prophetic edge

Although Easter is the more important liturgical feast, Christmas is more deeply imbedded in the culture. The accoutrements of Christmas gifts, carols, cards, Santa Claus, trees, lights, decorations of all kinds surpass those of Easter, hands down. Ask any child.

Christmas is a magical and mystical holiday so much so, in fact, that its joyous upside is too often matched in intensity by its more melancholy downside. While Christmas draws families together, it is also the season when, as Charles Dickens poignantly reminded us in *A Christmas Carol*, want and loneliness are most keenly felt.

Because of Christmas' melancholy downside, our religious and civic leaders regularly call upon us each year to be mindful of the needs of the poor, the homeless, the sick and those entrapped in various other states of desperation. And each year those of us who are blessed with families and friends with whom to rejoice, a comfortable home or apartment in which to live, an abundance of food to eat, and regular employment by which to earn our bread, dutifully give a conventional nod in the direction of the "less fortunate."

But little really changes in the condition of the downtrodden from one Christmas to another — any more than the plight of



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

the poor or that of victims of floods, earthquakes and famines is measurably improved by the thousands of grace-before-meals that are solemnly intoned on behalf of humanity's multiple needs.

Some highly motivated individuals may actually try to do something personally about the ills of the world. They may, for example, invest a few hours of their time during the holidays to serve meals at a homeless shelter or otherwise to assist in the care of those unlucky enough to find themselves in such places at Christmas. Memories of happier times in a distant past must surely foment within the hearts of the homeless the sort of searing pain that only the lost and the desolate can fully experience and finally understand.

Nevertheless, the message of Christmas

remains the same each year. God deigned to come among us as an innocent and helpless child, the Prince of Peace, offering the promise of redemption and eternal life to those who would love one another, forgive those who injure them, reach out to those in need, and "do the right" and "love goodness," and "walk humbly" with their God (Micah 6:8).

When we measure that message of Christmas against the often terrifying reality of events taking place in the various trouble spots of the world and even within the fabric of our own personal, professional and family lives, does that message still ring true? Does it have the power to transform and ennoble reality, or is the message instead merely a gerrymandered collection of familiar words and sweet sentiments, trotted out each year along with the Yuletide decorations?

The greatest challenge to faith, after all, is not denial or rejection; it is indifference. Those who deny or reject the faith at least take it seriously enough to do so. The greater problem is with those who don't take the faith seriously enough to reject or deny it. At this season of the year, every Christian is confronted anew with that challenge to faith. Do our words and songs about the Christ child, the Prince of Peace,

and the Savior of the world have any bearing whatever on real people, real life, and real events? Or are they the stuff of which fairy-tales are made?

The only real test of faith is the action it generates. It is an empty gesture to say that one believes when there is no personal cost for that belief, what the late Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the cost of discipleship." It is surely an inauthentic faith that does not issue forth in love, justice, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, forbearance, self-sacrifice and the like.

At Christmas we may not feel the urge to rush to the nearest soup kitchen or homeless shelter to give aid to those "less fortunate" than ourselves, but that is at least part of the idea. The rest has to do with taking steps, in accordance with one's own opportunities, talents, and resources, to help change unjust systems and institutions.

A social ministry rooted in faith is not just a matter for talk; it is a matter for action. We are to be doers of the word, and not hearers only (James 1:23).

There is, in the end, a prophetic edge to Christmas.

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

God comes as a child with a message of love

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 1:18-24. (R1) Isaiah 7:10-14. (R2) Romans 1:1-7.

Christmas is a story of extraordinary love and trust. Joseph was startled to learn of Mary's condition. He didn't want to humiliate her publicly. He loved her too much for that. He was unwilling to expose her to the law, so he decided to divorce her quietly.

But suddenly an angel appeared to him in a dream and said that Mary had conceived her child by the power of the Holy Spirit. Most men would have said, "It's just a dream. Nothing has changed." But not Joseph. He believed in God and he believed in Mary. Christmas is the celebration of extraordinary love and trust. How wonderful if all married couples would have such love and trust in each other.

During the Cuban missile crisis some 35 years ago, ID cards were passed out to important government officials so they could in a crisis retreat to a cavernous nuclear bomb shelter dug into a rural Virginia mountainside. When officials came to give Chief Justice Earl Warren his pass, he asked where Mrs. Warren's pass was.

"Well, ah, there's not room for, um, wives," he was told, not only very important people. "Well, in that case," Warren said, now you have room for another VIP," as



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

smiling he handed his pass back. Warren wasn't going anywhere without his wife.

Joseph had the same commitment to Mary. How fortunate are those couples who have such love and trust! Christmas celebrates such love and trust.

But more important, Christmas is the entrance of God into human experience. The angel told Joseph to name Mary's son Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. All this happened to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel," a name meaning "God is with us."

God with us! What an amazing thought — the very God of the universe with us. The manger in Bethlehem cradles a King — the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Yet so few who encountered him had any idea of who he was.

The youngest person ever to win the Nobel Prize in physics was William Lawrence Bragg, who was only 25 at the time. Bragg was an avid gardener. When he moved to London to head the Royal Institution, he reluctantly left behind the beautiful Cambridge garden he had spent so many years perfecting. Life in a city apartment made him restless and unhappy until he found an ingenious solution.

Dressed in old gardening clothes with a spade over one shoulder, he patrolled the streets of a nearby wealthy district until he found a house whose garden tempted him. Then he rang the bell and, tipping his hat respectfully to the lady of the house, introduced himself as "Willie," an odd-job gardener with one free afternoon a week. His employer found Willie a treasure. Until, alas, one day a knowledgeable visitor looked out through her window and gasped, "Good heavens, what is Sir Lawrence Bragg doing in your garden?"

Likewise, we might gasp, "What is God doing in a stable?" Christmas reminds us that the God of all creation humbled himself and took upon himself human flesh. God's plan is brilliant in its simplicity. How better to communicate with us than by becoming one of us. Not with dramatic signs

that would leave people spellbound; but with gentle love — the love of a baby.

No wonder we light up our cities. No wonder carols fill the air. It is a breathtaking story, God comes to us as a child so we can love him and be loving and trusting to one another.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, December 21

Song of Songs 2:8-14 or Zephaniah 3:14-18; Luke 1:39-45

Tuesday, December 22

1 Samuel 1:24-28; Luke 1:46-56

Wednesday, December 23

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

Thursday, December 24

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16;

Luke 1:67-79

Friday, December 25

Midnight: Isaiah 9:1-6; Titus 2:11-14;

Luke 2:1-14

Dawn: Isaiah 62:11-12; Titus 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

Saturday, December 26

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



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