

Christmas 2017

Merry Christmas everyone! First, let me paint a picture for you. As you know, Fr. Juan has been tremendously successful in recruiting altar servers. Naturally they all wanted to serve for Christmas Eve. So for each of the 3 Christmas Eve Masses, between 15 and 20 servers had signed up! I jokingly said to Fr. Juan, "If you need something for them all to do, you could always have them dress as Mary, Joseph, angels and shepherds." Well, Fr. Juan took me seriously, loved the idea, and ran with it. So we had talented servers on Christmas Eve doing double duty. They were in procession first as servers. Next were transformed into Mary, Joseph, angels and shepherds. Then back to altar service attire for the rest of the Mass.

Well, seeing Mary and Joseph coming into the sanctuary reminded me of another Christmas, in another parish. It was a special Christmas Eve for the pastor. You may have heard me share this before. It was Fr. Dave's first Christmas in his new parish. Naturally he wanted everything to be perfect, the best Christmas the parish had ever seen. So he helped plan all the music, organized decorating the church, and just like Fr. Juan, spent plenty of time rehearsing Mary, Joseph, the angels and shepherds for a little live Nativity.

It was pretty stressful trying to make everything perfect, but Fr. Dave was new and didn't know any better. Ever experience what happens when you try to make everything perfect? It can be pretty stressful. Fr. Dave certainly was stressed, and as is often the case, that put others on edge too. You know how that can turn out!

Well, the 1st Christmas Eve Mass began, just the way it was rehearsed. Things were going smoothly, and when the time came, Mary and Joseph came to the sanctuary just like two of our servers did at each of the Masses yesterday. Of course the church was really warm and packed, with lots that could be distracting. Mary was pretty nervous, as we can get when we've been asked to do everything perfectly. She was looking around at everyone, but not necessarily looking down at the steps as she started into the sanctuary. Unfortunately she missed the 2nd step. She tripped, went down, and poor baby Jesus from the Nativity set went flying in the air, landing hard with a thud. Everybody gasped, especially Fr. Dave. Baby Jesus' arm broke off, his head was cracked, and Fr. Dave was beside himself. His perfect Christmas was ruined. Although people on the way out of Mass told him it was a beautiful celebration, he could only think that his perfectly planned Christmas was ruined.

After the Mass, he went over to the rectory, got a few band-aids, and patched Jesus up the best he could. Then put the little Jesus back in the manger.

Before the next Mass began he was still upset, but then the strangest thing happened. He saw the Smith family standing in front of the manger, looking really intently, trying to figure out what the bandaged infant was all about. Then he heard little Jimmy, a Kindergartner, talking to his brother.

“Look at the Baby Jesus! He must have broken his arm. I didn’t know that could happen! I guess he was just like me when he was little. Wow! He must understand the things that can happen to little kids like me!”

Jack, Jimmy’s older brother was chuckling at first. But then he started to think. That is the message of Christmas! God came down to earth to become one like us. God understands human life from the inside. Even the stages we go through growing up. Stages he experienced. The bumps and bruises too! When we pray, we are speaking with someone who loves us, has been there, and can lead us through whatever life throws our way. Jack bent over to thank his little brother.

Next Jimmy’s mom and dad started pondering. A whole new appreciation of Mary and Joseph struck them. No matter how much you love your children, how hard you try to protect them, sometimes all you can do is recognize the hurt, let them know you are there for them, kiss the boo boo, and bandage it up. They thought: God may be our Father, but having given us free will, he can’t prevent our experiencing bumps, bruises, pain and suffering at times. But He can love us through it.

Fr. Dave was speechless. Until it came time during the Mass to preach that is. He started by explaining how he really wanted to make this the perfect Christmas for everyone, and how in the process he lost the focus a bit. Then he told folks how the baby in the manger got banged up. Life is like that.

From there he went on - Christmas isn’t perfect because *we* make it that way. It is tempting to try, and we often can get caught in that trap, but it is a fool’s errand!

What is perfect about Christmas is perfect love taking on human flesh. God, perfect love, entering this imperfect, broken, fallen human world.

Perfect loving willingly taking on human limitations. Not just getting banged up a bit, but perfect love take on all that sin can throw against us, even suffering and death. And through that act of perfect mercy, he not only won for us redemption,

and opened the way to eternal life. He made it possible for suffering to be redemptive: the paschal mystery.

Jesus was born in the flesh so we can be reborn in the spirit.

He lived life, faced death, rose from the dead and proves God's perfect love can survive anything, even shame and death. Love never fails!

What a Christmas that was! There was the Fall, brokenness, bandages, love. A family succeeded in connecting to Jesus. A ruined Christmas was redeemed. It was all there!

Thankfully this baby Jesus made it to our manger safe. But there are more than enough bruises and broken places among us to connect the dots.

Let us pray for the grace to accept that suffering is part of life. It can bring bitterness, or it can be transformed into a path to deeper trust and love. We can pray too for the compassion to bandage one another's wounds with caring, love and prayer.

May such actions and convictions help us all to enter into the story of the Incarnation, so that we can see the wonder of the infant in the manger through Jimmy's eyes. Here is Jesus, a Savior who understands. We pray too to see through his brother's eyes: Jesus understands little kids, but also teenagers. With Jimmy's parents, may we see the inevitability of suffering, but recognize that it can be redemptive. Like Fr. Dave, may we discover that sometimes little disasters open up more meaning than our very best plans.

May Jesus open our eyes so that each of us can see perfect love for us, born of the Virgin Mary, bruised and broken under Pontius Pilate, loved back from death into new life. Perfect love, Jesus, inviting us into the same amazing journey, the passage through death to life, the paschal mystery.

May God bless you all, not with a perfect Christmas, but bless you with an encounter with perfect love. Jesus, born this day in Bethlehem.