The “Sacrament” of the Christmas Tree

Third Sunday of Advent, Year B, 2017
Isaiah 61:1-2a,10-11; 1Thessalonians 5:6-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28
(Inspired by John Shea)

- A few years ago, when I was at St. Nicholas Parish in Zanesville, our Christmas tree fell over one night and it was a mess!
- Bulbs got broken and ornaments got smashed. The whole tree had to be re-trimmed.
- From that time on, I insisted that the Christmas tree in the rectory be fastened to the wall by a wire.
- The Christmas tree means a lot to me because I love Christmas and everything about it.
- Trees go up this time of year in homes all around the globe and they provide beauty and warmth for the Season.
- The Christmas tree is also a kind of Sacrament – or, more accurately, what the church calls a sacramental because (like a statue or a medal worn around the neck) it reminds us of the Presence of God. Specifically, the Christmas tree reminds us that God has entered fully into our human life.
- Almost every tree has a star or an angel on top of it and at the bottom there are gifts to be shared on Christmas Eve or Day.
- Sometimes there is also a Christmas scene or creche under the tree or perhaps a miniature village, well-lighted, can be found beneath the tree or near it.
- One Christmas when I was a boy, I received an electric train set – and it was a beauty.
- Santa – or someone – was thoughtful enough to have the train running on its track when I came down the stairs on Christmas morning.
- This train set was complete with a little village with houses and bridges and a train station.
- When you think of it, every Christmas tree is a symbol of the union between heaven and earth that happened that first Christmas and that continues to happen every Christmas and, indeed, every day because God became flesh.
- The star or the angel at top is a sign of heaven or of the divine.
- The gifts, the creche, the village, and the train remind us of our human life on earth.
- The tree brings heaven and earth together just as God came down from above to become the Babe of the earth at Bethlehem.
- In fact, Catholic thinkers often speak of an analogy or parallel between the Sacrament of Marriage and the union of God and Humankind in Christmas – the two have become one in both instances.
- So the Christmas tree can be seen as a true Sacramental because it reminds of God’s closeness.
- In the Gospel today (from John), John the Baptist answers those who think he might be the Messiah by proclaiming that he is not – but that rather he is the voice of one crying in the desert to make a straight pathway for the Lord.
- Like the Baptist we too are called to make straight the way of the Lord – to serve him truly and selflessly. We are not to let our own willful pride get in the way of giving witness to Christ.
- Later in the Gospel of John (Jn. 3:29-30), the Baptist says this of Jesus: “It is the groom who has the bride. The groom’s best man waits there listening for him and is overjoyed to hear his voice. That is my joy, and it is complete. He must increase, while I must decrease.” We Christians are called to make these words and attitude of John the Baptist our own. We the church are like the best man at a wedding. It’s not about us; it’s about Christ the Bridegroom.
- At the same time we the church are also the Bride of Christ.
- Whether we play the role of best man or of Bride, Christ the Bridegroom is first in our lives. We are not first.
- Here we see clearly that analogy between marriage and Christmas.
- The joy of the Baptist in allowing Christ to increase while we decrease is thus also our joy. Today, the Third Sunday of Advent, is the day to rejoice that Christmas is near. It is called Guadete Sunday in Latin – and our patron St. Paul tells us to “Rejoice Always” in the second reading.
- We rejoice because Christ came once for all in his Nativity and he stays with us through Word and Sacrament until the end of time.
- The Christmas tree is an excellent focus for reflection on the meaning of Advent.
- We long during this Season for the coming of the Savior just as our Jewish ancestors awaited the Messiah.
- The tree, with its heavenly top and its earthly bottom provides us with a source of daily meditation on God’s great love for humankind.
- As one author, John Shea [in *Starlight*], has pointed out, the Christmas tree sums up the Advent longing. In the Liturgy of Advent, there is a powerful antiphon.
- The first half prays: “Drop down, you heavens, from above and let the skies pour down the Just One.”
- The second half of the antiphon responds: “Let the earth open up and bud forth a Savior.”
- During Advent, then, we hope that the rain of the skies and the soil of the earth will combine to produce the Messiah.
- During Advent, we hope for the union between heaven and earth that happened at Christmas.
- When I was a boy, we carefully selected our tree and we had a great time trimming it.
- It is interesting how the electric lights have evolved from the bigger and hotter ones of the past to the tiny and safer ones of today.
- (In my parents’ childhood, before they had electric power, they used candles on the tree. For safety reasons, they could not light them for very long. But it must have been a beautiful sight.)
- It is also interesting that the different types of tree ornaments we had represented a kind of history of our family. I have saved some of the ornaments that my parents used during World War II – very simple, mostly clear glass with a little design painted on them. Several of these ornaments have paper that has dropped inside of them, reminding us of the shortage of metal during the war when cardboard had to be used to fix the ornaments to the tree.
- So the decorations of the tree remind us that Christ, symbolized by the electric bulbs, is the light of the world who came into the very concrete human history of every family and of the whole human family.
- As we contemplate the true meaning of Christmas, which the sacramental of the Christmas tree helps us to understand, may we also remember that we are called to be a Sacrament or Sacred Sign of God’s love for everyone – especially the poor and the sick and the stranger
who are literally Christ and literally the Christ Child who had no place to be born but a stable.

- And may we recall daily during this final week of Advent that it is through us, his disciples, that Christ continues to come into our community and the world.

- It is through us Christians that the Advent of our God becomes real today – the God who married himself to us!