CHRISTMAS 2015 HOMILY

WELCOME CHRIST THE STRANGER

There is a tradition known as Las Posadas which began about 400 years ago in Mexico. Las Posadas is a Spanish phrase meaning “The Lodgings.” The custom in its pure form is essentially a novena carried out on the nine days before Christmas. It consists of processions led by a man and a woman acting as Joseph and Mary who each night go to someone’s house symbolizing the “inn” of tonight’s Gospel. They first are not welcomed, but eventually are invited inside where the participants then pray the Rosary. This practice has evolved in many ways in different parts of the world. In the southwestern United States, children frequently play the roles of the holy couple. In the Philippines, it is often re-enacted on one night only – on Christmas Eve right before the Midnight Mass. That is how we did it in Zanesville when I was pastor of St. Nicholas Parish there. Every year we chose a young couple who went to different doors of the church to ask for shelter where they are refused several times until at last they are allowed to come in to join the congregation. One year a couple named Tom and Jana were chosen who discovered on Christmas Eve day (no less) that they were expecting. This made the Midnight Mass especially meaningful that year. And virtually everyone in church knew the good news of the pregnancy because in Zanesville there are no secrets!

However it is celebrated, Las Posadas is a poignant reminder that Jesus came into the world as a stranger. His parents had to settle for humble accommodations on the night he was born. The lodging they received that night was rough indeed – as is clear from our Gospel from Luke where the Christ Child was laid in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. It is also clear from the Gospels that many, especially the powerful, often treated Jesus as an outsider later throughout his public life and were anything but hospitable to him. Obviously his cruel death through crucifixion was meant to reduce him to subhuman status – someone unworthy of welcome.

We have all experienced being a stranger. We have all also experienced meeting strangers. This can happen to us when we have the blessing of serving the poor or the sick or the forgotten. There is a famous wood-cutting by an artist named Fritz Eichenberg (1901-1990), a friend of Dorothy Day (1897-1980), the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. In this carving entitled The Christ of the Breadlines (cut in 1951), there is a line at a soup kitchen and the halo above one of the those waiting indicates that Jesus is there too. Recently I visited a parishioner who is serving time in a state prison. Although the corrections staff were very kind to me, I felt out of place and like a stranger. For a few hours, I learned what it was like to have little freedom and I could understand what the man I visited experienced all the time. Although he said my presence was a blessing for him, I truly felt that I had spent some time with Christ in a way that was unforgettable.
Today there is much fear of terrorism and fear of the stranger. The fear of terrorism is rational, although statistically it is extremely unlikely that any of us will experience it directly. But the fear of the stranger is irrational and certainly unchristian if it is based solely on how a person looks or on their racial or ethnic or religious background. I have become an admirer of Angela Merkel, the current Chancellor of Germany and a committed Lutheran Christian. She has been the target of much criticism from her countrymen and even from her own political party because the government which she leads has decided to permit 800,000 refugees to enter the country from the Middle East – a number close to 1% of Germany’s current population of 83 million. Most of these immigrants are Syrians and many of them are Muslims. Merkel recently addressed members of her party and told them that “it is part of the identity of [Germany] to do great things.” She went on to praise the efforts of ordinary Germans to welcome and house the refugees, saying that these good works are “the best and most convincing answer to all those who try, with hatred and incitement in their hearts, to whip up sentiment against strangers.” “In the 21st century,” she continued, “cutting oneself off is not a rational option.” [All quotes from Columbus Dispatch, December 15, 2015, p. A11] She received a nine minute standing ovation.

In this country, Archbishop Joseph Tobin of Indianapolis recently accepted a Syrian family into his Archdiocese where Catholic charities there will settle and assist them. This family makes up a few of the approximately 1500 Syrian refugees the U.S. has taken in to date. The Archbishop took this action over the objections of the Governor of Indiana who is one of a number of governors who have said that Syrian refugees are not welcome in their states. Archbishop Tobin pointed out that the family in question had gone through a lengthy federal vetting process. He was acting in the best Catholic tradition of welcoming the stranger – a tradition which all Catholics are called to continue. It is also good for us to remember on this Holy night that a huge percentage of people in this church right now had ancestors who came to America and who were discriminated against to some degree because of their religion. Wave upon wave of Catholics had this experience. The people already here said these new immigrants were dangerous foreigners – something that is now too often being said or at least thought about Muslims as a group.

Jesus himself was born into a world of fear and terrorism – far worse that anything we are ever likely to experience. The so-called “Pax Romana” or the Roman Peace of that time was not a real peace – which is always based on justice. Rather, it was a calm that was enforced by the fear of oppression by the Roman soldiers who terrorized the population if it got out of line. It is ironic that the legions called upon when needed to put down Jewish disobedience in Jesus’ day were called in from Syria where they were garrisoned. Yet Jesus is the Prince of Peace who welcomed everyone, especially the strangers and outcasts and, most notably, those who were feared and hated as sinners. His parents were hardly welcomed in Bethlehem the night he was born. Later, as Saint Matthew records in his Gospel, the Holy Family themselves fled as refugees into Egypt.
to avoid the bloodbath of the Roman puppet King Herod which we know as the massacre of the “Holy Innocents” (Mt 2: 13-23).

God did not become man to make us feel cozy in our comfort zones. Christmas means that God became one of us to unite all peoples, whoever they are. Jesus was born into a particular Jewish culture, but he came for everyone; and, by following his example, we show openness to everyone too – within our human limits. Of course we (and our country) also have to be prudent and perhaps more than a little careful at times. But the church teaches that no one can use prudence as a phony excuse to discriminate or exclude. We are indeed true to our Catholic tradition when we overcome our fears and welcome the stranger – or, rather, welcome Christ in the stranger. May we look for ways to celebrate the holy custom of Las Posadas every day in some way!

Merry Christmas! And let us live Christmas!