

Homily by Adam Cardinal Maida  
Midnight Christmas Mass  
Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament, Detroit  
December 25, 2008

My brother priests, deacons and religious, brothers and sisters in the Lord:

On this joyous feast of Christmas, we gather to celebrate a great mystery – that the Son of God took on human flesh and was born into our world, that Almighty God became a tiny child, vulnerable and dependent on human care and loving attention. Tonight we do not simply commemorate a past event, we do something more; we celebrate an abiding and ongoing mystery.

While Christ's birth took place 2,000 years ago, we believe He is still with us as we gather in His name. Christmas celebrates not just a fact of history but a mystery, and as such, Christmas invites us to enter into a drama that is still happening, a living story of faith. Jesus, our Emmanuel, is always with us – in word and sacrament, and in the service of the Christian community.

Christmas is indeed a mystery – how and why would God have chosen to enter our world? As all good mysteries, we can celebrate Christmas only to the extent that we recognize our own human limits and let go of control. Mysteries offer us a new way of thinking, hoping, and dreaming that take us beyond the familiar. We are invited to enter into a whole new world, in this case, we are challenged to set aside the logic of human reasoning and to see everything about ourselves from the perspective of God's love.

These days, we certainly need to contemplate and celebrate the mystery of Christmas. Many of us are overshadowed with anxieties and fears; worry about financial well-being of our families and the companies and business for which we work. Many of us are even anxious about the future of our own homes and face the possibility of foreclosure or bankruptcy. And then there are the usual physical and psychological challenges that burden us.

In many ways, our situation in Detroit this year very well mirrors and matches the kind of world into which Jesus was born 2,000 years ago. Life was not easy in 1st century Palestine; the Jews were under oppressive Roman rule and had little reason for joy or hope. They continued to believe in the Lord and His promises, but nonetheless, the Lord seemed far away. The irony was the Lord was right in their midst and they did not know it!

The same challenge is true for us today: even as we walk in darkness, the light of Christ is at hand. In the very midst of our fears and uncertainty, the Lord draws near with His gentle strength. He comes to us as a child so that we, ourselves, might recognize that we, too, are also and always children, vulnerable and dependent, with the potential for spontaneous joy.

There is a need to let tonight's familiar Gospel from St. Luke startle us; we need to approach it with the wide eyes of children watching a mystery unfold. Consider the contrasts that St. Luke presents: a decree comes forth from Caesar Augustus, the most powerful person in all the world. This imperial decree greatly inconvenienced millions of people, including the

Holy Family; one word from Caesar changed everyone's lives. In contrast to the majestic pageantry of Imperial Rome, we see the lowly circumstances of the birth of Jesus in a cave on the edge of Bethlehem. To all appearances, the real power of the world was situated in Rome but, in truth, the tiny child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger was the true savior of the whole world. While Caesar Augustus proudly thought of himself as having established an era of peace, the true Prince of Peace was being adored by humble shepherds. While on Earth, Caesar and his minions were busy counting people's heads for the census and taxation purposes, countless hosts of angels were praising God and proclaiming the dawning of His reign, a reign of truth and love, justice and peace.

The feast of Christmas is indeed a mystery, a paradox or apparent contradiction. Christmas challenges us to believe that there is more to reality than what we see, what we know, and what we can prove. This world, with all of its beauty and goodness, is indeed passing away. We are destined for something more. If companies collapse and various structures that we used to rely on tumble away, perhaps it is part of the wisdom of God challenging us to look beyond the comfortable, convenient, and familiar. Christmas proclaims that everything is the opposite of what it seems on the surface. If God can be hidden in a manger, a feeding trough for animals, and if a virgin can give birth to a child, then truly, nothing is impossible for God!

The mystery of Christmas invites us to face our limits and confess our weaknesses and disappointment, but with a quiet confidence that God is with us precisely in our struggles. As Isaiah reminds us in tonight's first reading, it is the people in darkness who recognize the great light. Consider for a moment this analogy: when we are surrounded by the bright lights of the city, it is hard to see the stars above. But when we are in a dark setting with no artificial lights around, we truly can appreciate the wonder of the moon and the stars. In much the same way, as we live with the darkness of disappointment, diminishment and loss, we can begin to see the light that only Christ can offer, a light that never fails. So it is that St. Paul advises the young bishop Titus in today's second reading that we are to reject worldly desires, living with joyful and hopeful expectation for the appearance of our savior Jesus Christ.

The gift God wishes to give each of us and, indeed, our whole world, at this time is the gift of courage, a deepening and enlarging of our hearts. I speak of something which is much more than just optimism or hope for better days. The Lord wants us to stretch our minds so as to think in a whole new way. Christmas invites us to live the confidence that comes from knowing we are deeply loved by God – for why else would He send His own Son? Learning to accept God's love and trusting that nothing is impossible with God, we can then begin to see all other persons as brothers and sisters; we begin to wake up to our solidarity as members of one family of faith.

The Lord Jesus was born among us to teach us who God is and to show us how to love God. He also came to show us how to be fully human, how to live as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, of the heavenly Father. And so it is that the angels proclaim peace on Earth to those on whom God's favor rests. God's favor shines upon us even in this time of apparent darkness and uncertainty. His love and light never fail. He wants us to live in hope. Christ has come to teach us how to hope, how to let our fears about practical and earthly things be refined and purified. As the angel

told the shepherds that first Christmas, we must not be afraid, for we are the recipients of the Good News of salvation. A savior is born for us. He has come to us and will never desert us.

The mystery surrounds us. It is up to us to be humble enough to enter into the mystery, to participate in it, and to enjoy it. Such is the journey of Christmas! I pray that each of us here in this Cathedral tonight, throughout our metro area and all around the world, will come to know the hope, courage, light, and peace that only Jesus can bring. Christmas is not just a memory or a story from the past but it is truly an ongoing daily celebration of a mystery, a mystery we will soon share at the Lord's Table in the Word made flesh.

Like the shepherds that first Christmas, let us trust in the message of the angels, and with child-like enthusiasm and confidence, let us go to Bethlehem that we experience anew the mystery of our salvation in Jesus Christ. To Him be glory now and forever. Amen!