



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Christmas Day 2000 Homily

By Prior Paul Kidner, OSB

Christmas is the season of joy. The Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah, tell us to rejoice. We rejoice because God is with us. God has become man. He is in our midst. There is another dimension to this joy that we sometimes forget. God also rejoices in the Incarnation. He rejoices to be with us. The prophet Zephaniah says: "He will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love." This same prophet gives us a picture of God so happy to be with us that he breaks into song: "He will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals." In the same mysterious way that God needs us to love -- that's why he created us -so he needs us to be happy himself. Love is outgoing, and love needs something to go out to. Love is giving oneself and there is happiness in giving as well as receiving. That is something that we need to be reminded of at Christmas, and it applies to God as well as us; in fact, it applies to us because it applies to God who is the source of our being and of everything good in us.

The passage from the book of Isaiah that we heard earlier in this Mass was originally addressed to the exiles in Babylon. Their situation is worse than ours at the beginning of the 21st century. They have little cause for rejoicing. Their temple has been destroyed, they had been taken away in slavery from their promised land, they had spent 25 years in servitude to the Babylonians; their prospects looked hopeless. Yet the prophet tells them to rejoice, God has not forgotten them. He announces peace and salvation. He recalls that God told Moses when he made Israel into a people, his people: "I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them." With no resources of their own, the exiles know that it is God alone who can rescue them and they rejoice at the news that he wills to do so. Similarly with us. It is only when we acknowledge that we are powerless to bring about world peace and solve the problems closer to home with our own resources that we are ready to turn to God and rejoice at his gift of peace on that first Christmas night and know that he is giving that gift again, 2000 years later.

The Great Jubilee of the year 2000 has been leading us to a deeper realization of what the coming of Christ means for us. The fundamental meaning of Christmas is summed up in the words: God became man so that man might become God. God took on human nature and thereby gave human nature a share in the divine nature. God, in becoming incarnate, takes our human nature and gives us, in return, a participation in his divine nature. One of the antiphons in the old Latin liturgy of the Christmas season began with the words: "O admirabile commercium." "What a wonderful exchange!" The word commercium has the sense of a business deal, and the wonderful deal for us is that God became man so that man might become God.



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The babe in the manger is fully human, he has a perfect human nature, he experiences all that we experience except sin. One side of the deal which God makes with mankind is to take our human nature so as to unite it to himself in a personal union. And what does he give us in return? -- not that he owes us anything -- but in return the Word Incarnate gives to humanity an incomprehensible gift: a participation, real and intimate, in his divine nature. This participation had been given to Adam, the first man, but it was rendered impossible by Adam's sin. It is to restore this participation that the Word becomes Incarnate; it is to reopen for us the way to heaven that God is made man. Henceforth there will be in us two lives. The one, natural, which we have by our birth according to the flesh, but which, before baptism, is stained in consequence of original sin which makes us enemies of God, deserving of his anger and punishment. The other life, supernatural, is what God communicates to us by his grace, since the Incarnate Word merited it for us. By this wonderful exchange God again gives us his friendship, he restores to us the right of entering into possession of our eternal inheritance. Therefore our celebration of the Christmas mystery has the characteristic of joy, the joy of deliverance, of an inheritance regained, of peace found again. The angel announced: "Behold, I bring you tidings of great joy ... for this day is born to you a Savior." Let us open our hearts on this second millennium of the birth of Christ to receive this gift, to treasure it and allow it to transform our lives.