

## Christmas 2017

Is 62:1-5; Acts 13:16-17, 22-25; Mt 1:18-25

Although it seems to be better lately, the thing that I most dread going to the mall around this time of the year is not the crowding, or having to walk in the mall like a Nascar driver attempting to avoid a collision, or even the long lines at the registers. The thing that most gets to me is the clerks in the kiosks that come out at you when you are walking by. I mean, I try to avoid it: I try to look away, I speed up - yet - sometimes they come out at you anyway: "Excuse me sir ...". My first instinct to to pick up a blunt object and hold it up saying "Step back into the kiosk ... back ... no young man I do not want you to put hand cream on me! ... get back into your kiosk." One time the guy got mad that I didn't stop he walked away and muttered something angry under his breath - I thought "can't you just be happy for me that I don't have dry skin!"

A lot of people try to pressure us to do a lot of things, and these things are not always for our own good. The difference between someone who is pressuring us for their own benefit, and someone who is urging us for our own good is the motive of love. Have you ever looked at a friend or loved one and seen them struggling. They are lost, they are wandering, they need to be helped, they need others who truly love them - not just those who tell them what they want to hear to sell them something - they are missing out on their potential only they don't realize it. That's us a lot of times! We sometimes try to go through life like God is either not there, or is an optional extra - if we have time amid all the other things we have to do. Although, somewhere inside we are all incomplete without God - we just sometimes don't realize it.

We have heard in Advent the voice of John the Baptist which Paul reminds us of in the second reading today. We have been called upon to *prepare the way of the Lord and make straight his paths*. We have been urged to clear away the obstacles that get in the way of us receiving God eagerly and to keep that roadway to our heart open. We have been invited by the Church to experience the held-back joy of realizing that something really awesome can come to us through God's power. God calls on us to watch and prepare, the Church calls on us to join together to worship and think of the possibilities that can be ours if we let God into our lives more fully. Jesus has been wanting to be born in you as he was in Bethlehem many years ago. And why? So that he can get something for himself? So he can sell you something and make his quota? So he can control us? No! The motive of God is pure love. We are called on by God to accept in faith (in faith because it is something that we can't fully understand) that God joined to

humanity in the body Jesus so that we could have the chance to become part of the Body of Christ and be able to coexist with the divine God in heaven. This God who loves us - even if we ignore his presence sometimes - comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ - not as a pushy sales person trying to make a sale, not as someone who wants to control us - but as a little baby. Why did he come? As we heard in the first reading, so that we *will No more [be called] "Forsaken," or ... "Desolate," but [rather] shall be called "[The Lord's] Delight."* God comes as gently as a little baby and asks us to open our hearts to that coming.

So how do we do that - how do we open our heart? Well there here are a few tips to accepting Jesus as he comes to us at Christmas: First, listen carefully. The baby Jesus calls out to us not like the pushy shouts of the salesman that I tried to escape at the mall, not even as a baby who is in distress, or needy, or crying out in fear - but with the gentle cooing of a content child playing in the crib. You have to listen to that sound carefully to the sound of Jesus' voice to hear it. The first step is keeping our ears open to Jesus' gentle voice by reading scripture, praying privately, and hearing what he is saying in the events of our lives.

Second, we have to go into his presence. We have to encounter Jesus here in worship together, by receiving that Body in the Eucharist, and also by serving Jesus in others. I worked with many hardened men in my past career as a counselor. It always amazed me the power of a baby to touch them. The power of the unconditional love of the baby to open their hearts and minds and help them find their better selves. But in order to be effected they actually had to hold the child and look into its eyes. The more we engage with the actual presence of Jesus in the worshiping community, in the Eucharist, in genuine and loving service to others - the more we can be touched by Jesus' unconditional love and find our better selves through him.

Finally, we have to lower our guard to that love. You can hold a baby being uncomfortable, or you can settle in and just take in the presence of that miraculous being. Here at Christmas we can open our hearts to just accept the wonder of a God who has come to earth to take a body that is the bridge between the human and the divine. We can lay aside our skepticism, or needs for hard proof, our hurts and resentments, and our confusions about this miracle - and just look into Jesus' eyes and take him as he is and open our hearts to the love that is pouring out towards us - this way we let ourselves be joined to him in that love. As a child's birth is a new beginning, so Christmas holds the possibilities of new beginnings for all of us. May we all be touched by the child Jesus tonight and in the days yet to come - Merry Christmas!