

4th Sunday of Advent - Matthew 1:18-24

A Jesuit, a Dominican and a Franciscan were walking along an old road, debating the greatness of their Religious Orders. Suddenly, a vision of the Holy Family appeared in front of them, with Jesus in a manger and Mary and Joseph praying over Him.

The Franciscan fell on his face, overcome with awe at the sight of God born in such poverty. The Dominican fell to his knees, adoring the beautiful reflection of the Trinity and the Holy Family. The Jesuit walked up to Joseph, put his arm around his shoulder, and said, "So, where ya thinking of sending the kid for school?"

If Jesus is our Savior, why is the world still such a mess? If Jesus is the King of the Universe, why is so much of the universe still characterized by violence and hatred and evil? This is an important question because in a few days we are going to celebrate the birth of the Savior and it is essential that we understand how this birth of Jesus is Good News to us.

I think we realize that the central message of Jesus was to proclaim the Kingdom of God: a Kingdom of justice and peace, a Kingdom of forgiveness and love, where there would be no more sorrow or pain, no more hatred or death.

That is the Kingdom of God which we have been promised. But where is it? What we find when we look at our world is war and terrorism, misunderstanding, violence and hatred.

So if Jesus is Savior, where is the salvation? We would rather not face this question. But questions such as these, arise spontaneously from those who confront evil.

You have heard them as well as I have. Why did my husband or wife have to die? Why do I have to live in fear of terrorism? Why did my marriage come to an end? Why does my daughter have cancer?

Questions like these arise spontaneously from those who suffer. They are a way of asking: If the Savior is born and the Savior is real, where is the salvation? If Christ, in fact, is our Savior, why does so much evil still remain in our world?

Our tradition, of course, points towards an answer. We believe that we shall share in the Kingdom after our death. When we enter heaven we will have complete happiness with God.

We also believe that when Jesus comes again at the end of time, He will establish God's Kingdom here on earth. The Tradition says to us that the Kingdom is a Kingdom to come, a future Kingdom.

It will come in heaven or at the end of time. We know this, we believe this, but what good is that future Kingdom for those who have to suffer today? Is there only future Good News? Or is there present Good News that we can claim in our own lives?

Here is where the true mystery of Christmas becomes evident. Today's readings point to it. Isaiah tells us that a Child will be born called Emmanuel and Matthew in the Gospel makes it clear that Jesus is that Child.

The name, Emmanuel, is important. It means God is with us. As we await the coming salvation, promised us in the future, our God is not aloof.

Our God has chosen to take up our humanity. Our God is with us. As we deal with the loss of someone we love, Jesus, who knows human sorrow and pain, is not indifferent. He is with us.

As we cope with the fear of terrorism, Jesus, who knows human fear, is not unconcerned. He is with us. As we suffer from the rejection and failure of divorce, Jesus, who knows human rejection and failure, is not somewhere else. He is with us.

As we confront sickness in ourselves and in our families, Jesus, who had a human body, who felt pain, is not unconcerned. He is with us.

The Good News of the Christmas season is that as we await the full salvation that is to come, God is not far off. God did not choose to wait in some distant place until the Kingdom arrives.

God became human. God, in Christ, took up our human nature in all of its frailty and brokenness. God, in Christ, experienced the broken nature of our world. The mystery of Christmas is that God became one of us and that God remains with us.

Now the promises are still real, and we do expect that someday in the future we will enter the Kingdom and live in that perfection of God's peace and justice and love.

But until that day, we are not alone. Until that day through all that we have to suffer and endure, Jesus is Emmanuel—God with us!