

A GREEN CHRISTMAS

Introduction

My dear sisters and brothers, there is one key word in the liturgy of today, and that is 'rejoice'. The whole liturgy resounds with joy, and the reason we rejoice is because of the coming of Christ in the flesh. The word of the Father became flesh and dwelt amongst us. Each of us remembers at this Eucharist that Jesus came for me. And all of us are invited to embrace the light of Christ and to shun the darkness of sin. As the hymn says, 'Let every heart prepare him room'. And so, at the start of this Eucharist, we pause and ask forgiveness from God and each other for all our sins and offences.

Homily

As I was on my way here from Goregaon, I saw a young boy selling Christmas decorations at one of the traffic signals. This boy looked really miserable; I felt sorry for him and so I wanted to buy something from him. But when he showed me those decorations, I noticed that they were made of plastic injected with very gaudy colours, and they would not last very long. Now I felt that if I have to preach on a green Christmas, it would not be right for me to take those decorations from him. And so, I asked him the cost and gave him the money, but did not have the time to give him a sermon on eco-theology.

I was just reflecting on this as I was coming here and thought that if something like this had to happen about ten years ago, I probably would not have thought twice about buying those decorations. But today, we notice that there is a greater ecological consciousness – a greater consciousness about the environment, about our impact on the environment and what we need to do to change this. If you go to any of our parishes and schools, we see so much being done to protect the environment, raise awareness and to conscientise people. In your own parish here, before the Mass, I paid a visit to the very beautiful green crib, the impressive Christmas tree made with recycled bottles and the star made of paper cups. So there is much being done.

When the books of the Bible were written, ecology and the environment was not a major issue, and so the writers did not address this problem directly. But I believe that if we pause and reflect on the scripture readings of today, if we pause awhile and contemplate the crib, we learn several lessons which are very important for us if we have to take the ecological problem seriously. And so today, I would like to present to you very briefly three important lessons that we learn from the readings of today and from contemplating the crib.

The first lesson is that at Christmas, we are celebrating hope. This concept is expressed powerfully in the readings of today through the images of darkness and light. The prophet Isaiah was someone who was very involved in the society of his time. He noticed a lot of darkness that covered all sections of society, especially those who were in authority and power. He saw that the kings and rulers were constantly preparing for war and battle. They were preparing weapons and training armies and acquiring horses – they believed in conquest and domination. And the people lived in darkness because of the tremendous violence and suffering that this caused. But if we look at the words of the prophet Isaiah, we see that he was not a person who was discouraged by this scenario; rather, he was a man of hope. And he spoke those powerful words: 'The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light'. Even though the rulers and those in authority are not ideal rulers, God will raise a ruler who is just. God will raise a ruler with a different value system, one who will think genuinely of the welfare of his people; one who will eliminate war and usher in an era of peace. And in the Catholic Church, we believe that this prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled in the birth of Christ.

When we look around us today, my dear brothers and sisters, we may also see a lot of darkness, with those in authority and corporations, with an eye on profits, destroying the environment, destroying people and

communities, and we may be tempted to be discouraged and say, 'What can we do?' But what gives us hope and encouragement is that so many people have seen the light. They have embraced the light of Jesus, the values of Jesus, the simplicity, the care for the earth and the care for the poor and weak. The Bible assures us that the light will triumph over darkness. And so, the first lesson we learn is that we need to be always a people of hope.

The second lesson we learn from the readings is that Christmas is about discovering the dignity and the worth of every person and every created thing. I read a very beautiful and meaningful reflection today. It is a reflection by a priest named Fr Vinod Mascarenhas. He quotes an author who says that one of the most dangerous words in the English language is the word 'merely'. If you see the way this word is used, people use it to justify all kinds of injustice, oppression and violence. They say, 'These are merely a few plants and trees. What is the problem if we cut them down?' Or they say, 'These are merely a few workers. Let us get rid of them so that our company can make a profit'. 'There are so many animals; these are merely a few among them. There is nothing wrong if we kill them'. This way of thinking leads to more and more violence.

The message of Christmas is that in God's vocabulary and according to God's way of thinking, there is no one or nothing which is 'merely' someone or something. Jesus is not merely an infant in a manger: he is the Son of God who became flesh and pitched his tent among us. Mary is not merely a maiden with child: she is the mother of the Saviour. Joseph is not merely a carpenter: he is someone entrusted with the responsibility of caring and protecting the Holy Family. The shepherds are not merely shepherds: they are very privileged people who received the good news first and were the first ones to pay homage to Christ. Bethlehem is not merely an obscure town in Judah: it is the birthplace of the newborn King of the Jews. And this is not merely the world, but it is a world so loved by God that he gave his only son. And so, everything and everyone has a value, a place in God's grand design, his plan for the salvation of the world. And so, Christmas is an invitation for all of us to recognise the worth and dignity of every person and of every created thing.

The third lesson we learn is that Christmas is about loving and caring selflessly. When I study the stories about Jesus' birth, something struck me as very strange. When the angel appears to the shepherds and tells them that a king has been born for them in Bethlehem, he tells them to go there. How do the shepherds know where to go? Bethlehem is not very small – there are many families. But they are just told by the angel to go to Bethlehem. So how do they know where to go? Now some of you may say, 'Oh, that's easy. They followed the star'. But actually, if you read Luke's story, he does not mention the star. The star is found in the gospel of Matthew. But the angel gives the shepherds very important clues to look for. He says, 'This will be a sign for you: you will see a baby and his parents – a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger'. And this detail is mentioned thrice, which means the writer says that these are very important words. Why do they symbolise? In the Bible, swaddling clothes represent the care of parents for a baby. It is a love which is selfless. The parents make many sacrifices for the child, and the child does not do anything in return for the parents. So what the parents do is something totally selfless. Therefore, the message of the angel to the shepherds is: Look around you and everywhere you see selfless love being practised, people loving unselfishly and totally, there you will find God being born. The fathers of the Church recognised this truth very strongly, and expressed it in a beautiful hymn, *Ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est* – Where love and charity are found, there God abides.

And so, my dear brothers and sisters, you and I today are invited like the shepherds to come to Bethlehem and contemplate the King who is newly born, to reflect on the Word of God. And when we do this, we will realise these values of respect, of love and of embracing the light. Let us pray that like the shepherds, we may make haste to Bethlehem, to learn from this and to share this message with those we meet, Amen.



Fr Andrew Aranha
Dean of Theology & Professor of Scripture
St. Pius X College, Archdiocesan Seminary, Goregaon