

What Christmas is All About

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Today is Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is Latin for “rejoice.” If you look at your missalette, you will see that “rejoice” is the first word of the entrance antiphon of today's Mass.

The Church invites us to rejoice today because we are halfway through the season of Advent. Advent has a penitential character as we prepare for the coming of Jesus. This is why the priests and deacons wear purple during Advent. But today we rejoice because the Nativity of our Lord is less than two weeks away and that penitential character is briefly lifted just a little. So today our Advent candle is lit with a rose colored candle.

This can be a stressful time for us. As we struggle to remember what we are truly celebrating, society bombards us with commercials and advertisements that threaten to turn Christmas into a secular holiday. Much like it has already done with All Hallows Eve.

So let's take a moment to remember why Jesus came to earth, or even better, why it was necessary for Him to come. By doing this we can keep fresh our awareness of this deep meaning of Christmas, and keep fresh our experience of Christian joy.

If you ask most Christians why Jesus came to us they will most likely tell you that He came to save us. But why did we need to be saved? Saved from what?

To understand this we need to recall our story, we need to go back to the Book of Genesis. All too often as Catholics we focus on the New Testament and don't give much attention to the Old. But we must have an understanding of the Old Testament, especially the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis. We must understand the beginning of the story or nothing that follows will make any sense. This understanding is foundational to everything we believe.

In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth, the invisible world of the spirit and the visible world of the flesh. He created man as a creature of both flesh and spirit and endowed man with the gift of sanctifying grace, so that God and man could live together in a special garden, a garden of joy. In Eden, (Eden= joy) God lived among His children, our first parents.

In order to make them part of His family, God established a covenant with Adam and Eve. A covenant creates family. Think about the marriage covenant. When a man and a woman enter into the sacrament of Matrimony, their two families, for better or for worse, become one. In Eden, God established a covenant with humanity, making us His children.

In return for all that He gave us, God asked only one thing of our first parents, their trust. As a sign of this trust He forbid the man and the woman from eating the fruit of one tree in the middle of the Garden, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and evil, not because it was poisonous but because we were not yet ready for it.

But the envy of the devil always seeks to separate us from God. Through the serpent, the devil tempted Eve into eating the fruit that God had forbidden. At first nothing happened, because the fruit itself was not the

problem. It was not until Adam also ate of the fruit that mankind fell from grace. Eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge is a sign of a broken relationship, a broken covenant. With that action our first parents showed that they would rather trust in their own judgment than in God's. The tree and its fruit is a sign of our unwillingness to trust in God.

It has been said that man has only ever had one problem, he wants to be like God. But this is the devil's great lie, for we are already like God. We are created in His image and likeness.

Man then compounds his error by not allowing himself to be reconciled with God when he is given the opportunity. When Adam hears God walking in the garden he hides himself because he is naked. God calls for him, "Adam where are you?" Surely God knows where Adam is. The question is more like "Adam, what were you thinking, where is your head at?" When God asks Adam, "who told you, you were naked, have you then eaten of the tree whose fruit I forbid?" That was Adam's opportunity to confess his sin and ask for forgiveness. And God, who is all merciful, and all love, surely would have forgiven His son.

But instead Adam blamed everyone else. He blamed the woman, and then he blamed God for giving him the woman in the first place. The woman in her turn blamed the serpent. Again they demonstrated their unwillingness to trust God.

This mistrust, that led to the broken covenant, is what we call Original Sin. As an effect of original sin we lost the sanctifying grace that God had intended for us to have. This loss of grace changed our nature and we became

a fallen people, subject to sin and death. And like an inherited disease the effects of Original sin are passed down from generation to generation.

So God then put the man and the woman outside the garden as an act of mercy. If they had remained in the garden they might have eaten from the Tree of Life and remained forever in a state of existence that was less than what God intended. So our first parents were exiled from the garden with the promise that God would send a Savior who would restore to us the grace we lost.

For thousands of years mankind waited for the Savior, the Messiah, the Christ. We waited for the one who would come from God and restore all things to the way God meant for them to be, someone who would come to make all things new.

And when He came at last, we did not recognize Him. Jesus came to save us from the sin and death we were subject to, due to the disobedience of our first parents. He saved us by giving us gifts, the sacraments of the Church. He gave us Baptism of water and Spirit to restore to us the sanctifying grace we were meant to have. The restoration of that grace makes us once again children of God, giving us the privilege to call God, Father.

When we stumble and fall into mortal sin, once again threatening our spiritual lives, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, heals us and renews that grace. The remaining sacraments of Confirmation, Eucharist, Holy Orders, Matrimony and Anointing of the Sick, give us an increase in grace.

This why we had to be saved, this is why Jesus came, and this is the source of our joy.

And so we have come full circle. Through Jesus, God has established a New Covenant. He gives us the gift of Himself, and all He asks in return is our trust. We need to trust Him in the difficult times of our lives when we are most susceptible to the snares of the devil. The devil wants to keep us so busy and so distracted that we don't take time to pray, to read and reflect on the Gospels, and to remind ourselves of why Jesus came to us.

Through Baptism, what was once ours, is ours again. We are once again sons and daughters of God, but the devil is still envious and will not sit idly by. He continues to tempt us to turn away from God, and into sin and death.

But God has promised that evil will not have the last word. Our salvation began with the birth of Christ two thousand years ago. It will continue to grow and spread throughout the world until the last Christmas, no matter how dark the winter of history may get.

At the end of all things Jesus will come again, righting every wrong, wiping away every tear, and restoring every loss. Do not ever doubt that Jesus is stronger than the devil, and He gives us a share of that strength in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

As the Christmas season approaches let us take time each day to spend alone with God in prayer. Saint Paul told us to "rejoice always," and to never cease praying. Prayer keeps us close to God, and helps to remind us of all that he has done for us. As we exchange gifts with one another, this season, let us remember all the gifts that God has given us.

That's what Christmas is all about.