The Grand Illusion



For Sunday, December 25, 2022

The Nativity of the Lord

Isaiah 52:7-10

Hebrews 1:1-6

John 1:1-18

We are easily misled. Media stories often leave us wondering what really happened. Faked photos of astounding things go 'viral' and many believe they are real. The internet can be a confusing and often misleading place to find what is true. Is what we are seeing or hearing the truth or simply some illusion created by an imaginative or devious mind? We tend to follow the masses and are easily convinced of something's authenticity when it is seemingly verified by a majority of folks. This is the case for fashion trends, the latest figures of speech, philosophies or social styles. We need a yardstick to measure whether what we are buying into is authentic, trustworthy, and real or just something trendy and illusory. Perhaps we do not need to be too careful about the trustworthiness of matters like fashion and style, but we certainly ought to be when it comes to understanding ourselves as human beings. The World Wide Web may affirm what we want to hear, but it cannot tell us who we really are.

Who are we? To what reliable and trustworthy source do we look to understand ourselves? We live in a consumption based, disposable world. If something breaks, we buy a new one. In our materially dependent world, it is easy to cast aside the permanent in favor of the changeable and replaceable. Everything becomes fluid. What worked yesterday is replaced with a new and improved version tomorrow. We fill our lives with business. Often feeling stressed, what is immediately before us is enough to attend to. It is no wonder that many choose not to explore deeper existential questions. Human life runs the risk of being viewed with the same lens as everything else: disposable, replaceable, and changeable.

However, there is one interesting fact about life that is most certain: none of us chose to be here. We simply are. Taking the world at face value, one can certainly conclude that human life is just a random affair. Make the best of it, get whatever you can, avoid hardship and suffering. Soon enough, the ride will be over. Is this true? "But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God." (John 1:12-13) Today we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, a birth that reveals God's greatest accomplishment. Today humanity knows that it is not here by some random act or by pure human choice but because of a magnificent and wonderful Divine blessing. The humble birth of Jesus Christ shows the world that every human being is a unique, incredible, blessed and infinitely loved child of God. God wants us to be who we are! There is no way that the world can reveal this eternal truth to us. All the world can do is offer us illusions and myths that entertain us but do not redeem us.

Much of the violence we see in the world occurs at the hands of people who do not know they are loved. Loving well can only happen when a human soul first knows that it is loved by God and then realizes his or her sacred obligation to love others. Rooting the gift of love in God is the only way to perfect it. Sadly, due to centuries of sin and error, human love has been distorted and the unloved and unaccepted now walk among us. Consider what life would be like if Advent's peaceful and harmonious vision could be tasted just a bit as we walk through this world. Life would look so different if we only believed, with our whole hearts, minds, and souls in God's vision for who we are meant to be. Harmony, gentleness, and peace would more easily be found. Christmas would not be something we simply celebrate, but actually live.

If a person takes their cues about who they are solely from the secular world, they will most certainly be lost. Many people aren't willing to give up on the whole "god-idea" but are very reluctant to invest themselves completely into specific ideologies, conceptions, and theologies about God. Hence, we find the growing popularity of the phrase "spiritual but not religious." Instinctively they realize there is something more to who they are but are hesitant to commit to what precisely that is. Given the growing popularity of this illusion, it is no wonder why in many parts of the world, including here, institutional Christianity is in decline. Yet, in the midst of all that captures and intrigues us in our self-created virtual worlds, this longing for the anchor of faith that makes sense of it all still pulses within each soul.

In order for the birth of Christ to have power and effectively mean something, it cannot be something that is just celebrated once a year. We have to completely buy into what God is saying to us today and find the courage to allow it to change our lives. How do we live the incarnation? Do we really have faith that God became one of us in Jesus Christ? If we do, we will see that it is a game changer for sure. A real living faith in the incarnation means that our lives need to change. Our priorities have to shift, how we understand our identities in God becomes clearer, our life goals, and our souls all take on a crisper importance. As we sing Silent Night, O Holy Night, Joy to the World and Hark the Herald Angels Sing with fervor these next couple weeks, we also ought to be thinking about how all this talk can translate into greater action.

Christianity is in decline. That is for sure. There is a reason why people are no longer finding faith, hope and love within our walls and in our lives. The birth of Christ will not fit into a neat little box like those we find under our Christmas trees. It never did and it never will. The incarnation is always carried forth by the creative and rejuvenating power of God's Holy Spirit. The message today confirms that God never abandons his people, he is always with us. And so, God is with us even in the confusing moments of where the tides of life are bringing us today. The silence is not really silent as it speaks softly to us and always calls. There are people, who may not call themselves Christian, who are living the Beatitudes and the unconditional love taught and embodied by the Son of God. There is something instinctual about the incarnation. God does not leave his people.

If the systems around us, both secular and religious, are losing their effectiveness and relevance, then what are we going to do about it? This question needs to be at the heart of dialogue in the Church's magisterium, dioceses throughout the world, every parish in every town and in every home. We have been given the gift of a message today that God wants the world to hear. If it remains just a pious sentiment with little relevance or purpose, then the sights, sounds, and smells that lift up our souls today will soon become a nostalgic memory. Trusting in the guidance that led that first star to Bethlehem, we have to trust that if we can remain open and listen, God will bring us where we need to be. We need to trust. Faith inspired Joseph and Mary to leave their home, love brought them to Bethlehem and hope was brought into the world. People need this. People need to believe in the Gospel. People need a Church that can bring that Gospel into the world. People want what is real.

— Fr. Mark Suslenko

PRAYER

God of love, Father of all,

the darkness that covered

the earth has given way

to the bright dawn

of your Word made flesh.

Make us people of this light.

Make us faithful to your Word

that we may bring your life

to the waiting world.

Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.