

## Christmas 2016 ABC A Charlie Brown Christmas

Fr. Frank Schuster

This year in the midst of Advent and preparing for Christmas, in a rare free moment, I rediscovered the cartoon “A Charlie Brown Christmas”. You all remember that cartoon, don’t you? It is a classic. Charlie Brown is feeling depressed that Christmas is here and he can’t seem to get into the spirit. Linus has no sympathy for him so Charlie decides to talk to Lucy about it. In a rare moment in these cartoons where Lucy actually tries to lift Charlie’s spirits, for a fee of course, she puts Charlie in charge of the Christmas play (where she will play the role of the Christmas Queen naturally); however, when he is given the responsibility of picking out a Christmas tree, he can’t get even that right. Of all the trees, he picks a dying twig and the kids make fun of him. There are two moments in that cartoon that touched me. The first was in response to Charlie Brown’s question, “Can anyone tell me what Christmas really means?” the lights go down and Linus reverently quotes the Gospel of Luke recalling the birth of Christ. That was moving and a very good reminder. The second moment in the cartoon that was touching was when after Charlie Brown thinks he accidentally killed the Christmas tree he bought, the kids come and decorate it for him, making it beautiful. The cartoon ends with everyone singing Hark the Harold Angels Sing. Wonderful!

Now why would I mention this cartoon tonight? Although I hope it is true that many of us are having a merry Christmas, I think it is a fair to say that a number of us can feel a little like Charlie Brown this time of year, despite our best efforts. Whether it is a situation at home or a situation at work or just something going on in the soul right now, sometimes we can just feel numb or just indifferent to the meaning of Christmas. I think the remedy for this is what the Church is proclaiming to us tonight.

[Vigil Mass] Isaiah proclaims in our first reading, “For Zion’s sake I will not be silent, for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be quiet, until her vindication shines forth like the dawn and her victory like a burning torch.” In our Gospel reading, meanwhile, the Christmas story almost begins in tragedy by Joseph intending to divorce Mary quietly due to a pregnancy people would not know what to make of. An Angel of the Lord shined light into that dark moment by saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

[Midnight Mass] Isaiah proclaims in our first reading, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone...For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests.” Our Gospel from Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary arrived Bethlehem for the census, however there was no room for them at the inn. So, Mary gave birth to Jesus in a shelter made for animals.

Luke tells us, “...there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.’” Angels then lit up the sky to celebrate the birth of our savior.

[Mass During the Day] Our Gospel from John proclaims, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Like Isaiah prophesied in the first reading, “Break out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For the LORD comforts his people, he redeems Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations; all the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God.”

\*You see, my friends, the Church is proclaiming to us tonight (today) that Jesus is our savior. This is only good news if we truly recognize in our hearts we need Jesus as our savior. If we don't need Jesus as our savior celebrating Christmas makes no sense. In our Charlie Brown moments when we feel depressed, it is good to remember that the only reason why Christmas is worth celebrating is our Easter hope. I love that Charlie Brown Christmas tree because I think that dying twig can symbolize so many situations we all might be dealing with in our lives right now.

What are the dying Christmas trees in our hearts right now that need a little water, a little grace and a little love, at home, at work, in our world? The Good News is Jesus can take anything that feels like a dying twig in our lives and turn it into something life giving and beautiful. The Church community can do this to by the measure we do our part by carrying people to Christ ourselves by thought, word and deed.

And so we are left with two important questions as we enter into the Christmas season this year. First, we can ask ourselves, like Charlie Brown, what do I need this Christmas? We can spend so much time asking ourselves what do I want for Christmas that we can forget to ask the more important question, what do I need for Christmas? Archbishop Sartain challenges us with this question in his little book “An Advent Pilgrimage: Preparing Our Hearts for Jesus”. He answers this question with St. John of the Cross who argued that when God in heaven spoke his divine Word to us, following the Gospel of St. John, the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus. Therefore, when God spoke his divine Word to us and gave us Jesus, God gave us his everything. And so, when we ponder in our hearts, what do we really need this Christmas, ultimately what we really need right now is Jesus, wouldn't you say? We need to slow down, open our hearts, and welcome Jesus into our lives in a more sincere way because when God gave us Jesus on Christmas day, God gave us his everything. Whenever we lift up a prayer to God asking for this, that or whatever, when God answers back with the name of Jesus, with just that one word, he answers our prayers completely because in Jesus God gives us his everything. And so, when we ask ourselves: what do I need this Christmas; the answer is Jesus who is our savior, the way, the truth and the life.

And so, after answering the question what do I need this Christmas, and coming up with the correct answer, Jesus, a second all important question comes to mind for reflection which is, what shall I then give Jesus this Christmas? You see, we spend so much time buying gifts for others this time of year and at times some of us can even be more interested in looking for our own presents under the tree that we can forget the birthday boy altogether, which is I think what that Charlie Brown Christmas cartoon was trying to playfully warn us about. And so, we ask ourselves, what shall I give to Jesus this Christmas? Pope Francis gives a suggestion that the best gift we can give to Jesus is to let go of any fear we have right now and open our hearts in love to Jesus. He says, “Dear brothers and sisters, today, in this world, in this humanity, is born the savior, who is Christ the Lord. Let us pause before the child of Bethlehem. Let us allow our hearts to be touched, let us not fear this. Let us not fear that our hearts be moved. We need this! Let us allow ourselves to be warmed by the tenderness of God; we need his caress. God's caresses do not harm us. They give us peace and strength. We need his caresses. God is full of love: to him be praise and glory forever! God is peace: let us ask him to make us peacemakers each day, in our life, in our families, in our cities and nations, in the whole world. Let us be moved by God's goodness.” True wisdom from Pope Francis!

And so my friends, every so often, every one of us may experience a Charlie Brown Christmas. It can happen to us all. The remedy for this is to open our hearts in love to Jesus who for the sake of our salvation has loved us first. And so, like I have said before, whether or not you are having a merry Christmas this year, and I hope most of you will. What is achievable for everyone is this: I wish you all a blessed Christmas through Christ our Lord. Amen.