

December 22, 2013 – Fourth Sunday of Advent
Prepared by Sister Theresa Baldini, MM

Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24

The reading from Isaiah emerges from a context of public panic and personal loss of faith. Armies were about to invade Judah, threatening to march into Jerusalem and dethrone the king. Isaiah exhorted the king: *“If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.”* (Isaiah 7:9). Advent highlights the deep faith of Isaiah, as he waited with trust and peace, and in his belief that God alone saves.

In Matthew’s gospel a domestic crisis frightened and agitated Joseph: the woman to whom he was engaged was found to be pregnant. Joseph, a just person, would do nothing that was ever unkind. He would quietly divorce Mary and disappear from a mystery beyond his comprehension. When sincerity and wisdom had reached their limit, God plunged Joseph still further into mystery. At this moment an angel announced the virginal conception of Jesus through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit.

And in Paul’s letter to the Romans, Jesus appeared thoroughly human, heir to the promises given to David. Yet those royal promises were brought to their fulfillment by Jesus being raised from the dead, becoming the Christ, our universal savior.

As we reflect anew on the coming of Jesus into our lives, it may be well for us to ask: *What is Christmas to those who are not Christians?* Other religions are not outside the Christ mystery. They are part and parcel of that mystery. That is why dialogue with the world religions is very important. How will we build the bridges of God’s love unless we know other religions and their people? We Christians are called to be bridge builders, and unless we do that, we are going to continue to suffer violence in the world because a lot of the violence is religious in nature. Christianity has the responsibility to incarnate the love of God by reaching out to other religions to talk about this mystery of God, which gives every human person a sense of belonging, a sense of worth.

When I was in Juba, South Sudan, on Sundays the lepers who lived in a nearby village were permitted to come into town to beg. Since we had no refrigeration, I went to the market frequently, as food never lasted long. At the market that Sunday I bought some *sukumawiki* (something like spinach) and put it into a small cotton bag. As I walked down the path, there was a fork in the road. I was walking straight toward our small dwelling, when I noticed about eight women from the leper colony with some small children coming down the other road. At first I was going to go ahead quickly as I did not have any money left to give them. However, something inside of me encouraged me to wait for the women and children. When they approached, I offered them my bag of *sukumawki*. One of the women who had no fingers graciously received the bag with her elbows because both her hands were bandaged. I then said to them in modified Arabic, *Aniina salii?* (May we say a prayer together?) The women immediately formed a circle and we intertwined our elbows with each other. We prayed and danced together around the circle. Then the woman who received the bag went to the center of the circle where she had placed the bag, and brought it to me with a beautiful smile. I bowed to her and she to me. Then we departed saying to each other, *Masalaam!* (Go with peace!)

As I went home, I could hear the women singing, and I could hear my heart singing too. In the evening before going to bed I usually reflect on the gospel for the next day. As I opened my Bible, I was surprised that it opened to the passage – not to the gospel passage I expected – but to Mark’s Gospel, at the end of the first chapter, where the leper comes to Jesus and says: *If you want to, you can heal me.* I found myself saying: *If you want to, you can make me acceptable, you can give me a sense of belonging!*

I realized that the deep joy I was experiencing from my encounter with the women was not that anyone of them was physically healed, but rather, that we gave each other a sense of belonging, a sense of worth, an inner healing. And this is at the heart of the Christmas mystery we are celebrating. Every day is Christmas when we give this gift of acceptance to another.

Another experience in South Sudan was when Bishop Paride Taban initiated the formation of a Council of Churches. Once formed, this collaboration with the different Christian churches the Diocese of Torit enabled all of us to work together in assisting the people. An imam in the geographic area of the diocese had a small Muslim community, and he, too, was invited to be part of the council, expanding it beyond a council of “churches,” to an interfaith council. Whenever food supplies or other items came from Catholic Relief Services, Norwegian Church Aid or elsewhere, the supplies were given to all the council members to be distributed to those in need, no matter what their religion might be.

The Incarnation reminds us we are interconnected to one another – that we are all called to become a communion of peoples, respecting and nurturing the maximum diversity among us. When you sit down face to face with another person and you start talking about the things that really matter, you are going to find more things in common than things that divide. When you find that bridge of commonality, there is Christ.

God seeks to be incarnate in an expanding incarnation. The Christ is waiting to be born anew. It matters what we do and how we live in relation to God and to one another, for only through our actions can we encounter God. Christian life is an adventure, God’s adventure in love. We need to recapture a sense of this adventure in love and to experience being part of it – a presence holding all of creation together in an infinite embrace.

All are welcome in God’s house, where there is room for all; not one shall be turned away from God’s love!

This is Christmas!

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