

THE CHRISTMAS CONNECTION
Homily for Christmas Eve-Lk 2:1-20
LPC, 12/24/16

The invention of a three-dimensional display of Christ's Nativity is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, for the purpose of educating people about Christ's birth. If this is so St. Francis did a great job, didn't he? Most of us to this day learn about the first Christmas from viewing and participating in the arrangement of crèche scenes.

When I lived in the Washington DC area, one of my favorite things to do at Christmas time was to go to the National Cathedral to see the annual display of Christmas crèches. There were dozens of them from all over the world. Each culture represented the Nativity of Christ in its own way.

The figures in the scene from Southeast Asia wore sarongs. The Ghanaian figures wore kente cloth. The wise men in the Scottish scene wore kilts, and one of them was bringing a bottle of Scotch as a gift to the Baby Jesus. The figures were made of wood, of straw, of ceramic, of corncobs, even cartridge cases. The rich variety was always eloquent and touching. But there was one thing that nearly all of them had in common, besides the subject matter, I mean.

This common factor became apparent to me only when I viewed one Nativity scene that departed from the norm. In this scene, and I can't even remember what culture produced it, two figures were united in a single figurine. In one of the statuettes, an old shepherd was crouched beside a young shepherd, with his arm around the young man's shoulders. The eyes of both were fixed on the Baby Jesus. Viewing this moving display, I realized something about your typical manger scene.

In nearly all manger scenes, the figures are separate from one another. They can be moved independently from one another. You can put the wise men on one side and the shepherds on the other, or you can mix them all up. Wherever my family has lived, I have tried to figure out which direction is east, and put the wise men of our home nativity set on that side.

There are many advantages to having separate, independent figures. This design makes it easier to pack up and store the manger scene after Christmas. And it enables the entire family to participate in its display.

A set with separate figures makes it possible to imagine a story behind each one of the people at the manger. For there surely is a story for each person who comes to worship Jesus. This unusual joined figurine of the old and the young shepherd that I saw at the National Cathedral has something to say too.

What it says is that Christmas connects people. At Christmas, Jesus, the Son of God, becomes a human being to bring all human beings to God. In the process Jesus, by becoming a brother to all humankind, makes all humankind brothers and sisters. We are all one family. We are all connected.

Jesus as an adult will preach this explicitly. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength. This is the first and great commandment; and the second is like unto it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus intends that people be connected to God and to each other.

Even from the beginning, from the time of his birth, Jesus was about connections between people and between people and God. Christmas itself is about connections. If ever there is a time for people to remember that we are all connected, it is Christmas.

We instinctively know this, as we reunite with family members at Christmas. Even if we live singly and don’t travel to see family, we exert ourselves to come out on this night of all nights to sit in crowded pews. We may even have spent some time before Christmas in some charitable pursuit, connecting in some way with people with whom we might not otherwise associate.

This latter activity is very important, because as the evangelist Luke makes clear, the Good News of the Coming of Christ is first directed to those on the lowest level of society and privilege: the shepherds. Jesus comes, among other things, to bring good news to the poor.

When we come to the manger, when we come to worship Jesus, we do well to remember that the poor were here first. The shepherds were here before us. Jesus intends that the poor never be left out. We do well to remember this, and not just at Christmas.

The fact is that no one comes to the manger alone. Let there be connections between those of us who have come to the manger. Let us, like the older shepherd in that scene, reach out and actually touch those at our side. Let us stand, shoulder to shoulder with our eyes fixed on the one for whom we all have been yearning, whether we knew it or not.

No one comes to the manger alone. Whoever you are, you are not alone tonight. Christmas has connected us. We are connected in this space here tonight, and whether we realize it or not, we will still be connected when we leave this place. That is part of what Christmas means. Christmas connects people.