

Saint John the Baptist Parish
Jefferson, Wisconsin
Most Rev. William H. Bullock
Bishop Emeritus of the Diocese of Madison

8:00PM

CHRISTMAS 2007
HOMILY FOR (MIDNIGHT)

Scripture Texts:

1. Is 9:1-6
2. Ti 2:11-14
3. Lk2:1-14(14)

My Dear Friends in Christ,

Typical of the generosity of Father Tom Coyle, I was invited to offer this Mass and Preach. I am very grateful to join him, to our two seminarian friends, Tim Renz and Dave Johannes and to all of you who have come to celebrate the Feast of Christmas at Saint John the Baptist Parish.

The central theme of Christmas is God's love. Last Christmas, I stressed opening the "Inn" in our lives to Jesus. The gospel depicts the scene of Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem on a donkey, seeking shelter from the cold winter in order to provide Mary a place in which to have Jesus born. The story of God's love is so simple and moves and touches us deeply. There was no room for them at the Inn so they sought out shelter from the cold and Jesus was born in a stable.

So often we are like the Innkeeper. We are so full of ourselves that we shut out God's love because we are so busy with "other" things. It is not that we are so twisted in our values or perverse; it is that we are preoccupied. Preoccupied with the pursuit of things that don't really bring true and lasting peace in our lives.

This year I would like to draw your attention to God's gift of Hope. Essential to our understanding of the gift of hope is – in order for it to be real, hope must contain elements and power to change. When we call situations hopeless, they are without an ability to change. In terminal illness we say – there is no hope for this person to get well. It is the end for them. Death will come.

Hope however is a key word in Biblical Faith and most of us learned to pray the act of hope from our mother's knee. Our prayer was one that declared our simple reliance on God:

“Oh my God, relying on your infinite goodness and promises, I hope to obtain pardon of my sins, the help of your grace, and life everlasting, through the merits of Jesus Christ, my Lord and Redeemer.”

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI has written an Encyclical letter called: “In Hope We Are Saved.” (*Spe Salvi facti sumus*).

I would like to reflect on the gift of Hope with you at Christmas because it goes to the heart of the expression of God's love for us. All too often in the world around us our hopes are dashed, killed or suffocated.

In our third Millennium we live in an age of war, threats of expanded war, of terrorism, and of shooting sprees at shopping centers. This age "keeps us on edge" wondering as we tune in the evening news – what new killing, kidnapping or abuse will be covered and graphically shown. But what grips us is we wonder, "when we ourselves might be the next victim."

In the middle of that startling reality, life is frighteningly real, but Pope Benedict XVI reminds us there is hope for us.

"A first essential setting for learning hope is prayer. When no one listens anymore, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone anymore, I can always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to

help me deal with a need or expectation that goes beyond the human capacity for hope, God can help me. When I have plunged into complete solitude... if I pray, I am never totally alone.”

– ENCYCLICAL LETTER *SPE SALVI* OF BENEDICT XVI #32

Hope is not a denial of reality. Hope is not “pie in the sky”, nor is it the “opium of people,” a mental drug that puts us to sleep. No, hope is for real. Hope opens us to the infinite promises of Christ, who tells us that “the baby will play in cobra’s dew”, “the lion and the lamb will lie together”, that peace will come to all who believe in and live the message of His love. That whatever catastrophe strikes us, there is life beyond death and that gives us real hope. In God, life is stronger than death, love is stronger than hate, and hope is stronger than cynicism.

Christmas brings forth deep sentiments of our faith; it can bring forth nostalgia for times past. When we were young and growing up as small children life was so sweet, simple and satisfying. Christmas as a child evokes beauties in the form of happy childhood memories.

Times have changed radically in our century and we, now in a nuclear age of family, must live it differently. Hope is our foundation, as unpromising as each one of us can appear from time to time – Time will come when Christ will straighten us out completely. “Dysfunction” in all walks of life will then disappear forever. We will then possess all we hoped for, life with Jesus and we will be changed in him. We will be loving, caring and upright people.

Our Catholic faith rests on genuine hope. God’s power can and will change us into his own loving, caring, people – he will remove our stubbornness and make us loveable, open and ready to adjust to the age in which he has called us to live.

The Eucharist we celebrate tonight gathers us as God's people and calls us to be believers, to be people full of hope and willing to make the sacrifices necessary to become loving people.

I have a "bottom line" question for you and for myself this Christmas. What change in your life, habits or lifestyle do you wish to make? Whatever that change, are you willing to take a definite course of thinking, of praying, and of action to make that change? If you are, you have hope. If you lay a resolution on your will, it will disappear in time.

In the silence of this Christmas Eve – let us begin by naming that area of behavior, addiction or attitude we wish to change. Now, take the specifics of that change and place it on this altar here tonight. Lay down "your life in loving surrender" to Jesus so that He may fill your life with Hope and bring you true peace of Christmas.

Merry Christmas!