

## CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS 2009

**Fr. James Thompson, O.P.**

Isaiah 9:1-6 - A Son is given to us.

Titus 2:11-14 - The epiphany of the Glory of our Great God & Savior, Jesus Christ.

Luke 2:1-14 – Today in the city of David a savior has been born who is Christ the Lord!

Some of you were here at the first weekend of this academic year. If so you heard me preach a particular challenge to our students, which was simply this: “Question your faith!” At first that might sound shocking coming from a Catholic priest. But, of course, I was not inviting them to become full of doubts and lose their faith. No, this was counsel for intellectual survival -- a call *not* to run away from questions and intellectual difficulties, but to face them head on. After all, how can you really call your beliefs your own if you have never tested them? The move from a child’s faith to an adult’s faith begins when real-world difficulties raise a question in your mind.

Tonight/(Today) we celebrate the first of the two great dogmas of our Christian faith: the Incarnation of God in the human being, Jesus Christ. But even Christmas takes second place to the other great festival, which, of course, is Easter, when that same human being proved himself the Son of God by leaving his tomb behind, the forerunner of the resurrection of all the dead. At Easter we proclaim that he is risen as he said. Now, at Christmas, we proclaim that the Lord God has come to visit his people as the prophets of yore foretold. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us in their own distinctive ways that Mary conceived this child they named Jesus without the benefit of a human father. The Gospel of John tells us that this person coming to this world was the very Word of God, God’s own creative self-expression. Every Sunday and solemn feast we recite the Nicene Creed, in which we proclaim that we believe that Jesus Christ “came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man.” These religious beliefs are a common-place for Christians, of course. However, a thoughtful and educated person might object that this makes for a nice story and all about baby Jesus and the virgin mother meek and mild, but that’s it. The tale itself can’t be literally true, you might think. How can we be expected to believe something that is scientifically impossible? If you are the logical sort, you might further protest that ‘virgin-mother’ is a contradiction of terms. Any truth claim that is a complete contradiction is obviously false on the very face of it. These are the

sorts of mental difficulties that many people have in even considering the possibility that the Christmas story might be true.

Let's take the Christmas Story head on and address both the scientific and the logical types of difficulty. Has science disproven Jesus' virginal conception and birth? Let's suppose for the sake of argument that Jesus Christ literally was without a father, that Mary somehow conceived him as a virgin and came to full term and bore a healthy baby boy. What could the quantified, empirical sciences say about such an event? Unexpected? Yes. Weird? Yeah, I'd say so. Extremely improbable? Certainly. Could the scientific community say with utter certitude, "Impossible?" No, not if it happened, no matter how remotely improbable. Even if it only happened once in the history of the universe, it would not be disproven by its utter improbability. The only thing you could demonstrate would be the unlikelihood of it ever happening again. Yes, the Christian doctrine does make an odd claim. Its improbability may make you disbelieve it. But there is no way to prove scientifically that it did not happen. Both affirmation and denial of the claim are made on the basis of belief.

The logical objection is related to this. There is an old Dominican saying about proper argumentation in search of the truth: "Seldom affirm, never deny, always distinguish." So let me distinguish between a **contradiction** and **paradox**. A logical contradiction, strictly speaking, means that one and the same thing cannot be both true and not true at the same time in the same way. To affirm a logical contradiction is to make a nonsensical claim. A paradox, on the other hand, is an *apparent* contradiction that is not a true logical contradiction. A paradox represents dialectically opposed partial truths that point toward a more basic truth. We Christians maintain that Mary's unique status as both virgin and mother is a paradox, and not a contradiction. "Virgin mother" is a "verbal" contradiction which expresses the paradox of this unique situation. And the religious meaning of this event points to the paradox of incarnation itself. How the almighty God could in any way be said to be incarnated into human form. Jesus is himself the "sign of contradiction" that the attitude of the source of all creation is not one of prideful domination, but humble self-giving. In short, despite all appearances to the contrary in this valley of tears, God is love.

Yes, if we do believe in the virginal conception of Jesus Christ, we do so on religious authority, and consider it a matter of divine revelation. But science in a sense can't touch it, and logic is not laid aside when we make this claim.

The majority of Christians through the ages have considered the Christmas Story an important enough part of the Gospel Story that it has been accepted as actual fact and not simply a nice literary device. Through the years there are many parts of the Bible that Christians have not taken literally, but for some reason this part of the Story usually is. Maybe you don't buy it. But upon reflection I think you would have to say that it is not because it could never have happened, but that for some reason you don't like the Story of the world to be told that way. It might not be the improbability that bothers you, but the implications for your own life if the Gospel is really true. After all, if this story is true, then how should you live?

When you put the whole Christmas Package together, this is what you get: The claim is that the baby whose birth we celebrate today was in the literal sense of the words the very God by whom all things were made, visible and invisible. That the otherwise unanswerable question of evil is met with the answer of the ultimate strength of God's love for us; that whatever sorrows and pains we suffer in life, God was quite literally on the hook, when our great God and Savior Jesus Christ died on the Cross. But that is not the end. Another highly improbable event is claimed in the Gospel story. Jesus Christ is no longer dead. He is risen as he said, and promises to transform your life through your faith in him. It is a story that has often been told. It is a story that a good chunk of the human race already believes. It is, we claim, the one story that makes the best sense of our lives, and of the ultimate purposes of God. This story also makes the definitive claim that the meaning of life is not the Will to Power, but the Power to Love. After all, the Source and Goal of the entire universe, the Mind and Spirit behind it all, is Love, and Jesus is that love incarnate.

This is a tale worth celebrating with great joy, and so a Merry Christmas to you all!