Penance and Peace

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Christmas Midnight Mass
Sunday Readings for December 25, 2012 for Cycle C:
Is 9:1-6; Ps 96; Titus 2:11-14; Lk 2:1-14

PENANCE AND PEACE

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Millions send Christmas greetings without averting fully to the Mystery being celebrated in the Mass of Christ. However, as December 25 draws near, Catholics realize that the "Holiday Season" takes its meaning from the holyday that evokes memories, an avalanche of reminiscences from each stage of our lives. We remember the birth of Christ most adequately when we enter into the Paschal Mystery, re-presented in the Eucharistic liturgy. The coming of Jesus brings new hope, but we must never forget the cost!

On Christmas Day I weep
Good Friday to rejoice.
I watch the Child asleep
Does He half dream the choice
The Man must make and keep?

(Vassar Miller, 1924-1998, "Christmas Mourning")

In the Eucharistic sacrifice we focus on the moment of the self-giving that epitomized the life of obedient love expressed in the words of the psalmist: "Behold, I come to do your will, O God" (Ps 40:8, cited in Heb 10:7). Ideally, this declaration should be a natural development of biblical faith, but only Jesus could make it the leitmotif of his entire life. The poet might move on to the triumph of Christ's resurrection, but chose to recall the need for pardon and new life in Baptism.

Slay me, pierced to the core
With Christmas penitence
So I who, new-born, soar
To that Child's innocence,
May wound the Man no more. (Miller)

The seasons of Advent and Lent provide occasion for a renewed awareness of our sins and the call "to reject impious ways and worldly desires so that we may live temperately, justly and devoutly..." (Tit 2:12).

With a lively faith in the unity of God's plan of redemption, the Church harks back to the prophets and psalmists to find hints of the ultimate gift in the person of his Son. Indeed, the biblical message had meaning for each generation that heard the Word, but it also takes on deeper significance as it becomes part of the larger picture. The Christian might express the liturgical use of the Scriptures as follows:
Jesus I love to trace  
Throughout the sacred page,  
The footsteps of thy grace  
The same in every age!  
O grant that I may faithful be  
To clearer light vouchsafed to me!

(William Cowper, 1731-1800, "Old Testament Gospel")

God's will, made known to Moses and other great teachers of Israel, should be the basis for all our human relationships. Then would divine law be the foundation for settling disputes rather than force of arms. "One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war any more" (Is 2:4). The same prophet recalled the divine promise to David: "Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever" (2 Sam 7:16). In times of trial and oppression these words became a beacon of hope for Israel. The Son of David received titles that described his intimacy with God, the basis for his authority and creativity in dealing with conflict. "They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace" (Is 9:5).

St. Luke draws attention to such divine promises when he describes the place and circumstances of Jesus' birth. Bethlehem, however, was so ensnared in the details of daily life that people missed the marvel in their midst.

Strange news! A city full? Will none give way  
To lodge a guest that comes not every day?  
No inn, nor tavern void? Yet I descry  
One empty place alone, where we may lie:  
In too much fullness is some want: but where?  
Men's empty hearts: let's ask for lodging there.  
But if they not admit us, then we'll say  
Their hearts, as well as inns, are made of clay."

(John Suckling, 1609-1642, "Upon Christ His Birth")

Peace on earth must begin with our change of heart. This begins the process whereby we receive and respond to abundant signs of God's mercy. Then we are able to carry the Prince of Peace to places most in need of his healing and ordering of all things toward wholeness.