

Christmas causes problems. Can I say that without getting in trouble? Christmas, and everything that comes with it, creates conflict. That may not be what you expected to hear on the day after Christmas, but chances are you’ve felt it.

Christmas means a lot of things to a lot of people. The Christmas that Christians celebrate is just as cluttered as the rest of the world, but our clutter has meaning because it focuses on Christ. Christmas is the Christ Mass or Divine Service celebrated in the Church to mark the birth of the Christ. Christmas is about Jesus Christ. And that creates problems.

A teacher once shared an interesting account. Certain children who apparently did not come from Christian homes were noticeably uncomfortable singing Christmas carols— like “Silent Night.” She claimed some of the children even became violent when they heard references to Jesus. This was not merely an emotional issue, though I’m sure it was at least this. When it was time to sing “Jingle Bells” and “Rudolph, the Red Nosed Reindeer” these same children were noticeably relieved. They didn’t have to hear about Jesus anymore. Now, we can sing about old Santa Claus and jingle bells, because they really don’t matter to us. If, however, Jesus Christ is the Son of God, He matters, and somehow these children knew it. They wanted to escape.

The arrival of Jesus created problems in Mary and Joseph’s life. Most of those complications are well known to you, I’m sure, beginning with the scandal of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. But those problems were always being counterbalanced with surprising blessings. Both Mary and Joseph had direct communication from angels, and there were people like the shepherds, whose appearance at the stable provided independent confirmation that God was telling the truth and was really behind all that was happening.

Another person to offer such confirmation was Simeon. When Jesus was forty days old, he was brought to the temple by Mary and Joseph, for standard purification rituals, and we’re told Simeon was right there waiting for them. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Christ, the One anointed to be the true King. So far so good, right? Simeon takes the child in his arms and starts praising God, saying, “Lord, now I can go in peace because you kept your promise to me. My eyes have seen your salvation.” Here he is. Now

think of this from Mary's perspective. Forty days into baby Jesus' life and this is at least the second time a stranger has shown up to rejoice in the Child. Imagine the encouragement this would provide to her and Joseph. At the very least, this was proof they were not losing it. Other people were confirming God's plan. You can imagine Mary beginning to exhale...until Simeon turns to her and says something that must've chilled her to the bone. He says, "This Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed...and a sword will pierce through your own soul also, so that thoughts from many hearts will be revealed."

Excuse me, what? A sword will pierce my soul? People will be opposed to my son? This would be hard for any new mother to process, yet Mary knew better than anyone that Christmas creates problems. But that's not all Simeon said; he had called Jesus the salvation of all people, appointed not just for the fall but also the raising up of many in Israel; Simeon was functioning as a prophet in these moments, and he was telling the truth about Jesus. The baby would grow into a man who would reveal the thoughts of many hearts, and who would be opposed all the way to a cross, and this seeming defeat would be transformed by God into victory. To believe it is to receive salvation from the consequences of sin. Simeon was also telling the truth about Mary; she would witness the rejection, the suffering, and the death of her son; a sword to her soul. Yet she would see her Son raised from death, alive, and would be numbered among the first Christians, with a better understanding than most of the depth of the sacrifice involved in making God's salvation real.

It's true. Christmas creates problems. There is a sword that comes with it. We feel it in every uncomfortable conversation with skeptical relatives. We feel it when the simple greeting "Merry Christmas" is deemed controversial. It stirs up an ancient conflict. In Jesus, God is making a claim on everyone's life, a claim that cannot be avoided. It's a claim that a person can struggle against. But the person who accepts this claim discovers something marvelous: the Christ of Christmas creates peace with God. In the great conflict, Jesus brings you onto God's side, the side of good. The side of light.

We, like everyone else, can be carried away with Christmas busyness that has very little to do with Christ. You have given yourself a great gift today, by being here. You have given yourself the gift of time; time to reflect on what all the fuss is about. This is supposed to be a birthday celebration, with an important twist. Jesus

is not just one more child among other children. He is the one child who calls people, wherever they are, to worship Him!

Yesterday's Gospel reading, the gospel for Christmas Day, John chapter one, revealed the mystery at the heart of our worship: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." At the birth of Jesus, heaven becomes part of earth. Jesus, who is God, becomes Mary's child and this child becomes the brother of every man and woman who has ever lived. God chooses to share permanently in our humanity. Jesus did not come down like an incognito King, walking among his people in disguise, only to retreat to the comfort of his castle. He came down to take our pain and misery upon Himself.

If a sword pierced Mary's soul, then how would you describe what happened to Jesus? The Christmas Carol "What Child is This" says it like this: "Nails, spear shall pierce Him through; the cross be borne for me, for you; Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the Son of Mary." Have you ever noticed, this verse is often skipped, or the words of another verse substituted for these? A decision is made to edit the *unpleasantness* out of the song. The problem is, you can't edit the cross out of Jesus' life—it was the point of His coming. And, you can't edit the sword out of Mary's life, or the life of any Christian. When God writes His name on you in Holy Baptism, you are brought into His family and treated like a favorite child. And you become like Jesus in His suffering, someone who will be opposed, someone who will reveal the thoughts of people's hearts. It's not something most Christians go looking for—it simply happens as we live our faith in the world. When you feel the sword beginning to pierce, remember how Jesus was pierced—and remember that if you are joined to Jesus in His suffering, then you are also joined to Jesus in glory—in risen victory—this is your future. The sword always comes first, but then comes the time described in another Christmas Carol, that says, "Not in that poor lowly stable, with the oxen standing by shall we see Him, but in heaven, set at God's right hand on high. Then like stars, His children crowned, all in white, His praise will sound!\*"

Christmas created a conflict that climaxed at the cross; a conflict in which Jesus conquered on Easter morning. This is the light that shines in the darkness. With Simeon, your eyes see this light—salvation in Jesus, and with Simeon you can go in peace, into whatever comes next.

\*LSB 376 "Once in Royal David's City"

