

I'm offering a full service homily today – I even have help on how to tell if you're throwing a successful Christmas party. FESTIVITY LEVEL ONE: Your guests are sitting around chatting, nibbling the party food, sipping their drinks. They are admiring your Christmas ornaments and stand around the piano singing carols. FESTIVITY LEVEL TWO: Your guests are talking loudly, occasionally to one another. They are wolfing down the food, gulping their drinks, rearranging your Christmas ornaments and sitting on the piano singing "I gotta be Me." FESTIVITY LEVEL THREE: Your guests are holding conversations with inanimate objects, gulping other people's drinks, wolfing down Christmas ornaments and dancing around the piano shouting the words "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." FESTIVITY LEVEL FOUR: Your guests, food smeared across their faces, are capering around the burning Christmas tree in some bizarre but jolly dance. The piano has gone missing. NOW, unless you rent your home, or own heavy firearms, you generally do not want your parties operating above LEVEL THREE. The true test of party success, however, is whether or not the police arrive. If they do arrive, your job as host is to see that they don't arrest anyone. If they are intent on arresting someone, your job is to see that it isn't you. (HOMILETICS, Sept-Oct 2014, p. 55)

First, a little theology. There is a word that occurs throughout the Bible that is like a little bell ringing and saying 'pay attention' – something important is happening here. It is BEHOLD, 'Odi' in Greek. Behold, he is coming with upon the clouds and all shall see him! Behold, the Lamb of God, Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.

And while this is not a word we use much in modern English, it is still very much used in some languages. For example, Modern Hebrew does not say "Here is the salt" but rather "Behold the salt." But in the Bible -- behold is a marker word. It signals shifting perspective, the holding together or even the conflating of radically different points of view. It signals the moment when the language of belief is silenced by the exaltation of faith as these paradoxical perspectives are brought together into an explosion of silence and light. This silence holds us in thrall, in self-forgetfulness. Our settled understanding of ordinary matters is shattered and falls into nothing as light breaks upon us. Beholding is not confined to the pages of scripture or to monastic cells; it is the wellspring of ordinary life transfigured.

Let me illustrate. A few years ago the Bodleian Library published a Christmas card that shows the Annunciation to the Shepherds – or rather, to one shepherd, who is standing on a hillside shielding his eyes from the glory of the herald angel. Beside him, his cheeky dog is doing what good sheepdogs do: barking at the strange intruder. It is not hard to imagine the poor shepherd, in dread and awe of this staggering vision, trying to get the dog to shut up long enough to hear what the angelic messenger is saying.

I often wonder if all the fretful, frenetic activity in our lives isn't our human way of barking at angels, of trying to drive away the signs that are everywhere around us, calling us to stop, to wake up, to behold, to receive a new and larger perspective, to pay attention to what is most important in life, to behold the face of God in every ordinary moment every day. (adapted from WEAVINGS Jan/Feb 2006 , neither author nor pages cited) But what are we supposed to behold particularly at Christmas? "an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." God in the flesh. The Incarnation of Christ.

Second, what does this mean – that God became flesh, became one of us. A lot more than we often realize. Do you find yourself complaining each Christmas at all the vulgar, tawdry, tasteless, cheap, and ugly

things you see around you? Are you angry at the world for vulgarizing the most sublime event in history – next to the resurrection? If so, here is a little therapy for our anger: the thought that God deliberately designed Christmas – the first Christmas – as vulgar.

Vulgar means ‘common.’ It means the opposite of ‘sophisticated, stylish, aristocratic.’ The vulgarity of Christmas is a kind of sacrament or sign of the vulgarity of the Christian faith and of the Catholic church.

I have a number of good friends who were once Anglicans and are now Catholics (and vice versa!) One of the now Catholics calls his shabby local church ‘Our Lady of Perpetual Linoleum.’ He had been used to the most enchantingly lovely old stone Anglican churches, the liturgy of the old Book of Common Prayer – probably the most beautiful liturgy in the history of the English language – and in general a church so tasteful that, as Ronald Knox said, “nobody in the whole world hates the Church of England.” Now Knox is aboard the Catholic ark, full of animals. And it is not at all elegant. Just look at us here tonight (today)! Describing the Catholic church, and why she joined, Flannery O’Connor said, “it’s a total mess -- we’re open sesame – here comes everybody!”

God chose such an ark for Himself when He came to earth. The manger is a miniature of Noah’s ark. We must cut through our traditional tendency to romanticize the manger scene. Anyone who has lived on a farm knows what’s in a stable. The primary smell is not incense! It is a word not used in polite company, and I can’t say in church. We uprooted suburban sophisticates often idealize farmers, peasants, stables, and even poverty – as long as it’s country poverty instead of city poverty. We even romanticize the cow manure in the stable, for our experience of cow manure is from buying plastic packages of processed manure in garden shops for fertilizer.

It is a fascinating thing that the only one who ever was able to choose his own place of birth -- chose a place full of manure. The incarnation does not mean some abstract doctrine about the intersection of eternity and time; the incarnation means that God stepped into our manure.

Noah’s ark, a type of the church, must have been full of manure – have you ever been close to the cages in a zoo? Job found wisdom and met God face to face from his DUNG heap. If I say it in Greek, it sounds elegant, but not if you are a Greek! St. Paul says that is all SKUBULA to sum up all his worldly achievements and treasures when compared to “the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord” Phil 3:8). SKUBULA is what we say when we back into a car or drop and smash a beautiful plate. How vulgar God is! Christ was a commoner from birth to death. He began in a borrowed cradle, He ended up in a borrowed tomb. The Church’s ‘preferential option for the poor’ is not an abstract ideology but a description of our Savior’s life.

When Christ comes to us now, He comes under an even lower form than a slave: the form of a little piece of bread, to be crushed by our teeth, in a sip of wine, mingled with our spittle, and swallowed like Jonah by the whale. THAT’S His style, His ‘class’ – always washing His disciples’ feet, like a slave.

So when we see the washed-out face without make-up on that old Salvation Army Lady in front of the grocery store this Christmas; when we grimace at the forced, pedestrian translation of the liturgy that some unpoetic bishops forced on us almost 10 years ago; when we see the cheap Santas and tinsel everywhere—remember that the God who invented galaxies and archangels also invented the Church of our Lady of Perpetual Linoleum, and cow manure. He came into both on Christmas because of the vulgarity and commonness of His love – for you and me and everyone else in this whole entire world. (adapted from Peter Kreeft, THE ANGELS AND THE ANTS: BRINGING HEAVEN CLOSER TO YOUR DAILY LIFE, Servant Publication, 1994, p. 97-98, 100)

Third, a story to conclude. Pastor Bob Kaylor writes: About 10 years ago, I was preparing a sermon for yet another Christmas Eve, trying to come up with another way to express the mystery of the Incarnation: God becoming flesh in Jesus. That's always a difficult task for any preacher during this season: trying to say something new in the midst of a story that's very old and very familiar. It's so familiar, in fact, that people often miss the meaning under all the layers of Christmas tradition.

That year, however, I found an illustration that really spoke to me about the reality that John speaks of when he writes: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14) The story was from a small church on another Christmas Eve, when another sanctuary was packed to standing room only. That year, this particular church had decided to have a living nativity in front of the church while the service was going on, including the presence of a real, live baby in the manger instead of the usual, predictable and quiet baby doll. As the pastor was preaching his sermon, the baby did what babies do: He filled his diaper to overflowing. Pretty soon, the disgusting smell began to waft through the crowded, rather warm, and tightly packed church, causing people to wrinkle and plug their noses, their eyes watering from the stench, all right in the middle of the sermon.

Now, there are certain distractions that preachers can handle during a sermon, like fussing children and a cell phone ring, but this one wasn't going to be overlooked. Without missing a beat, however, the pastor looked at his grossed-out congregation and back at the now smiling baby, and said, "Now we have an idea of what Christmas, the Incarnation, is really all about. It's not clean, it's not pretty, it's not fragrant, and there's no halo around the holy family. There's an odor not an aura, and God becoming a human was a messy, smelly business!" As one famous theologian once said: "You'll never truly appreciate the mystery of the Incarnation until you have changed a dirty diaper – and I mean the muddy kind!"

I thought this was a brilliant illustration, so I preached it on Christmas to end the sermon. On the day after Christmas, a couple was waiting for me when I got to the office. They were furious. They said to me, 'You ruined our Christmas. Your illustration was disgusting. How dare you imply that baby Jesus had soiled diapers! That's all we could talk about on Christmas Day.' (Man, I'll bet that Christmas dinner was fun!) They railed at me about it for an hour, and it was clear to me that they were offended by the idea of Jesus' being really human and engaging in things like digestion. They stormed out of the office, threatening to leave the church.

A few hours later, I decided to treat myself to a post-Christmas lunch at my favorite Chinese restaurant when I walked this couple. They sat down at the other end of the restaurant, seeing me but ignoring me, and it took every ounce of my sanctification to keep from ordering a pu-pu platter to be sent to their table.

Christmas offers us a great opportunity to appreciate the depth of the Incarnation and what it means for our humanity as well as God's divinity. The Word became flesh and took on everything that goes with it. As Karl Barth put it, "Jesus Christ is not only truly God, He is human like every one of us. He is human without limitation. He is not only similar to us; He is like us." (Bob Kaylor, in HOMILETICS, Nov-Dec 2014, p. 7) And because He became one of us, we are invited to become more like Him.

Thank you for coming! Claim the gift of this immense divine love, given to us every day of our lives! Have a wonderful Christmas! Amen!