

Christmas, 2015

-- As many of you may know, I'm looking forward to a trip to the Holy Land this April. As a part of that trip, we will be visiting the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the traditional site of Jesus' birth.

-- There's only one entrance to the Church. And, to get in, you have to bend down. That's assuming that you're over 4 feet tall, as most of us over 12 are. Yes, everyone entering the Church is brought low.

-- And if you go down the steps in the Church to the traditional site where Jesus was actually born, you bend down once again to get in there.

-- That "bending low" every adult pilgrim does when entering that Church is symbolic of what God did for us. Today, we're not just celebrating the birth of a special baby. We are remembering what God accomplished in stooping down to our level in order to save us, to bring us up to Himself.

-- *The Word was made flesh and pitched his tent among us.* So the gospel of John tells us in our morning readings. The Son of God was made lowly, coming to us as an infant child of a fairly poor couple from an occupied land.

-- Over 20 centuries later, most Christians who live in the Bethlehem area would also consider where they live occupied land. And Christians living in several countries to the east and south of them face troubles and even persecution, sometimes severe.

-- Of course, we still live in relative freedom. But we, too, are burdened by the worries of our time. We hear of attacks in Paris and San Bernadino. We wonder about seemingly random attacks from people with personal and/or political resentments. We wonder about our children's future.

-- But, even as we look at the seemingly peaceful manger scene, we know that things were not so peaceful back then. There have always been fears about what will happen in our world. What does this savior who came as an infant child have to say to us in our fears?

-- For one thing, Jesus comes for all of us, but especially for the least among us. He was first seen, not by kings and religious leaders, but by shepherds. Next to tax collectors and prostitutes they were about as low as you could get. Yet they recognized this infant's power.

-- Also, Jesus carried the burdens of all human beings, being like us in all things but sin. He knew misfortune, displacement, misunderstandings, even with those in his own family. And, of course, he knew suffering. There's nothing in the human condition he can't understand.

-- He tells us where real power lies. Today we hear politicians promising to once again make us a "great nation." Some propose to do this by building walls, others by more military power, others by government guaranteeing higher education, and so on and so forth.

-- But the real power of Jesus Christ is in his integrity of life and his ability to lower himself to our level to bring us up to God. No earthly power can do this. And no earthly power should be our ultimate hope.

-- This Christmas I invite you, as I challenge myself, to make a virtual trip to the Bethlehem Church and stoop down through that door. Give an hour or two to a sick or lonely neighbor over this holiday time. Reach out to a relative who is not popular in your family.

-- You may want to start the New Year by giving some time to a community meal, Hands of Grace or another organization reaching out to people in special need. The Spirit may inspire you in some other way.

-- The Son of God became flesh for us. He held back nothing. As we gaze upon him in the crib, may we lay before him all of our fears and dreams. The powers of this world will not bring true life. Only the Son of God can do that for you and me.

-- May you, your family and loved ones, have a most blessed Christmas filled with the peace that Christ alone can give you.