

+ Christmas
Midnight Mass

December 25, 2001

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given. (Isaiah 9:6)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ
My Very Dear Brothers of Our Lady of the Annunciation,

These words, which are taken from the Prophet Isaiah, found their perfect accomplishment in a little cave near Bethlehem some two thousand years ago and have continued to echo down through the ages. Indeed, a Child is born to us, and what a Child! Son of Mary, He is also the very Son whom the Father, in the brightness of eternity, before the day-star, engenders as God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God. This Messiah, whom many kings and prophets had longed to see and did not see, longed to hear and did not hear, was delivered into the arms of the Blessed Virgin, not only to be seen and to be heard, but also to be carried, to be embraced, to be kissed, to be dressed, and to be nourished at her breast.

But why in such estate? Although it may not strike us as posing any particular problem, some of the greatest minds have pondered over the rather lowly mode by which the Son of God, the Eternal Word came into this world. Could not Christ have appeared in glory as a full-grown man, as a terrible warrior, something like the angelic horseman covered with golden armor, who appeared from nowhere in the second book of the Maccabees to punish the wicked envoy of King Seleucus?¹ Shouldn't the Messiah, the son of David, have been something more like an Alexander the Great or a Julius Cesar?

No, instead we have an Infant-God, a Messiah, who comes to the world as a baby, a tiny child, who finds nothing better to do than to play with the beard of one of the three Wise-men as he steps forward to present his gift. Such is, at any rate the way in which one famous painting represents the scene, and there is nothing so very unlikely about this view of things.

The trouble with babies is, precisely, that they are just not serious: they refuse to be concerned with all the urgent business, the grave matters, that adults immerse ourselves in every day. The only thing these little ones take seriously, along with the basic necessities of life such as food, is, well... play. Even the Holy Innocents, those first martyrs of the New Testament, whose feast we will be celebrating in a few days, are said to continue their games before the throne of God:

You, tender flock of Christ, we sing / First victims slain for Christ your King,
Beneath the altar's heavenly ray / With martyr palms and crowns ye play.²

The curious thing is that God also, as Holy Scripture teaches us, has a penchant for playfulness. It is said, for instance, in a passage which is rightly attributed to the Second Person of the Holy Trinity in His role as Wisdom of God: "I was with him [i.e. with God the Creator, with the Father] forming all things: and was delighted every day, playing before him at all times; Playing in the world: and my delights were to be with the children of men."³ Jesus Himself, later on as an adult, will utter these rather mysterious words, having to do with the world's rejection of His message: "But whereunto shall I esteem this generation to be like? It is like to children sitting in the market place, who crying to their companions say: We have piped to you, and you have not danced: we have

¹ 2 Maccabees 3:25.

² Hymn "Salvete, flores Martyrum", from Lauds for the Feast of the Holy Innocents.

³ Proverbs 8:30-31.

lamented, and you have not mourned... And wisdom is justified by her children."⁴ Furthermore, is not the whole history of the world, as we have it recounted from God's point of view in the Bible, is not this whole story something of a Divine game of hide-'n-seek?

Sometimes man hides from God, as in the Garden of Eden: "And when they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in paradise at the afternoon air, Adam and his wife hid themselves from the face of the Lord God, amidst the trees of paradise. And the Lord God called Adam, and said to him: 'Where art thou?' And he said: 'I heard thy voice in paradise; and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.'"⁵ Sometimes it is God who hides Himself as it were, for instance in the burning bush, which appeared to Moses, or in the "whistling of the gentle air", which the Prophet Elijah heard on mount Horeb.⁶ "Verily thou art a hidden God," exclaims Isaiah, "the God of Israel, the savior."⁷ In an important work, originally published in Germany some fifty years ago and recently re-edited in an English translation, the Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper shows how play, or more generally, leisure is the necessary basis for any culture. It was in the context of a civilization of leisure and play, the world of the Ancient Greeks, that poetry and Philosophy first set the minds of men aflame with the desire of a deeper knowledge of the Truth. It was within the framework of the high Middle Ages and its culture largely patterned after the laborious leisure of monasteries, that Europe saw the emergence of the great universities and the extraordinary flourishing of every kind of science and art. Leisure, as Pieper so pertinently points out, results from the breathing space given to our lives by worship, by the celebration of feast days. Christian culture is really nothing else than a kind of fecundation of our lives by the spiritual energy derived from the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of Mass. Without Mass there would be no Christ-mass, no Christmas.

But in an age of "total work", in which leisure is often seen as merely a means of increasing the productivity of our work, in a time of war and, perhaps, or of economic recession, when so much must be done to simply hold our lives together, can we afford the time for Christmas play and leisure? The fact is that we *cannot* afford to do otherwise: outside the grace of Christmas, there really is no hope, and it is of the utmost importance to open our hearts to the incomparable joy that comes to us in the Infant-God of Bethlehem—that is, if we are ever to do anything serious in our lives.

O blessed Infancy—exclaims Blessed Gueric of Igny, a 12th century Cistercian—whose feebleness and folly are stronger and wiser than all men. ... The weakness of His Infancy triumphs over the prince of this world...holds captive the cruel tyrant, but frees us from captivity.⁸

For some time now, we at Clear Creek Abbey have been practicing the devotion of the Infant Jesus chaplet, hoping by this to solicit the aid of Our Little Lord in our efforts to complete the building of our monastery. Some of our friends have joined us in this prayer. In any case, this is our way of entrusting the future of this monastery, both on the spiritual level and for all that concerns our material needs, to the special protection of the holy infancy of Our Lord, which is, perhaps, exactly what the men and women of our time need most to meditate on.

From the throne of His Mother's arms the Infant Prince of Peace seems to say to each one of us: "If I come to you as a child, it is that you may have peace. In the world you shall have distress: but have confidence: the day will come when I will have another throne, the throne of the Cross and from that throne I will perform the most serious play ever played, that of my Passion and in so doing I shall overcome the world" (cf. Jn 16:33). Amen. Alleluia.

⁴ Matthew 11:16-17.

⁵ Genesis 3:8ff.

⁶ Cf. 1 Kings 19:12.

⁷ Isaiah 45:15.

⁸ First Christmas Sermon, tr. Sr. Rose of Lima, 1958.