

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As our Christmastide continues, I greet you all this day with a very merry Christmas! I begin with St. Paul's words to the church in Rome:

⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.
(Romans 12:6-8)

I read from St. Paul's letter to the Romans because this is the Seventh Day of the Christmastide, or as we are more familiar with, "On the seventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me..." anyone?

Seven swans a-swimming, which represent the seven gifts that St Paul reminds the Romans and us that we are all blessed with...ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, diligence, compassion, and cheerfulness. Here are our seven swans that our true love has given to us all. However, do we recognize these traits as gifts or do we view them or perceive them as our own conditioned behaviors.

Yes, in some senses these may be conditioned behaviors but the one's conditioning us and teaching us these traits have learned them from someone before them and so on until you recognize that the conditioning has been handed down through the generations but they have a source or a beginning somewhere long before us...herein lies the source of the gifts...our true love, rather the One who truly loves us all...God our creator and redeemer.

In this love for us, God gives to us, Jesus Christ who has been born for us as our Christmas celebration has told us and has occurred among us. In Jesus Christ our deliverance is assured. Jesus Christ comes to us as a vulnerable baby; full of promise and hope giving to us potential that St. Paul tells us just after he tells us of the gifts we are given. St. Paul tells of the potential for us:

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. (Romans 12:9-17)

This is the potential we have in the birth we celebrate in the Christmastide. But we all know this about this birth we celebrate. We know, we respect, and we love the gift of this child we are blessed with and all that comes with him. We know that in this baby is the very presence of God...and when we look upon this manger scene... we are looking into the very soul of God. But if we could strip away all the familiarity of the story, how do you suppose we could possibly anticipate encountering God? In other words, could we honestly envision the creator of all we know and see coming to us in the form of a lowly baby, birthed by a poor homeless teenaged girl

named Mary and both protected by a compassionate, faithful, and diligent young man named Joseph? Is God always right where we expect God to be...or is God in the last place we expect God to be?

Within the pressures of secularism and modern life today, they would tell us that God has given up on us, God has abandoned us, or simply that God is dead. Busy schedules, dual careers within marriages, cynicism and narcissism established and encouraged by a media that has deepened the divisions of difference and heightened our fear of it have all seemingly pushed God out of our lives...and in God's absence we have positioned ourselves at the very center of our lives. We no longer seem to recognize the sacredness of the gifts we have been given in life, nor do we recognize the presence of God in the gifts of blessings we are given. The very presence of God in our everyday lives is practically extinct. So yeah, God seems to have abandoned us because God does not act in a huge-flashy-Hollywood kind of way for us.

Feeding this notion is our misunderstanding that God is found only in certain places, in sacred buildings, in certain holy books, or in observances led by holy persons. God is NOT dead nor has God abandoned us. Rather, our focus has simply turned in on ourselves. We have become too busy pointing out the sins of others and complaining about all the noise in the world drowning out God that we have become blind to God working in our lives through the Holy Spirit.

In our Gospel lesson before us today we hear a couple of comments that are very common in this Gospel...and that is Luke's reference to the Holy Spirit. In this Gospel, the Holy Spirit is not just a character that lurks about in the background, Luke has the Holy Spirit front and center and I think this is a great reminder for us who are assembled around this Word today. We hear that the Holy Spirit rested on Simeon and that the Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that he would not see death before he would see the Messiah...may this also be a reminder for us that we too do not see the death before we see the Messiah. We hear also that the Holy Spirit guides Simeon. The Holy Spirit has not left us, the Holy Spirit continues to rest among us and guide us but are we able to trust, to listen, and to follow, or are we too consumed by the self and all our desires and passions?

In the readings proclaimed during this Christmastide we hear that our God is a powerful king, a great ruler, and a Prince of Peace, yet our God is humbler than our most powerful media giant, our most idolized political figures, or our adored athletes and recording artists within our current culture today. Our omnipotent God is not recognized as a celebrity who is plastered on every possible media outlet that exists, nor a greatly feared, powerful military leader with a great and powerful army at His beck and call but rather our omnipotent God is introduced to us as a vulnerable baby, who is homeless, born to a 14 years old mother. The introduction of this baby is not heard in the great halls of government or talked about among the elite of society, rather this birth is announced in the company of the Holy Spirit to the lowly and the scorned shepherds in the fields going about their everyday lives. But when they were told, they listened, they went and observed, and when they saw, they went about their life sharing all that they had seen and been told.

Today the Holy Spirit continues to rest upon this gathering and revealing the presence of God in Jesus Christ to us through the reading of Holy Scripture, prayer, and within this Holy Meal...our worship this day is the very presence of our God, it is our prayer to God...our worship together is Jesus Christ. In this assembly gathered today the Holy Spirit is at work enabling us to witness and to experience our God in this Holy Word which is the proclamation before us, we witness and to experience our Lord God in the bread and wine that is set before us and eaten by us.

God in Jesus Christ is given for us and through the Holy Spirit we take, we eat, we drink, we believe, and we go from here to share that we have been given salvation in this Holy Word and in this Holy Meal that is Jesus Christ. Or as St. Paul reminds us and the church in Corinth:

²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:26)

I pray that today you too may be guided by the Holy Spirit that enables us all to know that our Lord Jesus, has come among us as a little baby, helpless, innocent, fragile, and lowly. May we see our salvation in this manger and in this bread and wine that is set before us. As we go about our lives from this gathering, I pray that the Holy Spirit will enable us all to meet God in each other, in the lowly, the poor, and the small so that we might not miss the very presence of God among us.

As Mary, Joseph, and Jesus depart from the Temple, they head out into that world and into that ugly unjust reality just like each one of us gathered here today. They are not kept from it, nor are we, but we all face the harsh reality of our culture, along with the brutal reality of our own sin and death. But the Good News today for us is the gift we have received from the Lord, it is the promise that the sword of sin and death will pierce our soul, but we will not die, it is the promise kept, it is the fulfillment of God's Holy Word which is salvation for us all.

Today, like Simeon, we too hold Jesus in our hands. Today placed into our hands is the fulfillment of the promise God makes to us in Jesus Christ that is the bread and wine. Today like any other day we partake in our Holy Eucharist, we hold Christ in our hands, we hold the fulfillment of the promise that we are no longer a slave held in bondage to sin, but we are heirs of salvation...we are children of God...we are the promise of salvation.

We are then dismissed in peace according to the Lord's Word...we too have seen salvation which the Lord has prepared for us in our Holy Eucharist...that is the light and life of Jesus Christ. May we be that same light of glory for all the nation, not in words, rather in deeds of truth, grace, and understanding so that others may know the salvation prepared for all in this birth we celebrate in this Christmastide.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.