

Sermon for Christmas Day 2010, Nicosia

There was a music teacher who attended a conference and took his family with him. While at the conference he purchased a talking metronome. A metronome is a device for counting the beats in a song. Before they boarded their flight home, he had to go through security so he placed his carry-on bag onto the security-check conveyor belt.

The security guard's eyes widened as he watched the monitor. Then the guard slowly pulled out of the bag this strange looking device, a small black box covered with dials and switches. He asked the musician what this was. Other travelers, sensing trouble, vacated the area.

"It's a metronome," the musician replied weakly, as his son cringed in embarrassment. "It's a talking metronome," he insisted. "Look, I'll show you." He took the box and flipped a switch, realizing that he had no idea how it worked. "One . . . two . . . three . . . four," said the metronome in perfect time. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

As they gathered their belongings, the musician's son whispered, "Aren't you glad it didn't go 'four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . '?"

For the past few weeks we have been counting down the days until Christmas and now it's here.

And isn't this a wonderful day, look at the beautiful tree, and the lovely manger scene. Isn't this a day for everyone to rejoice and be happy? Of course it is. Because it's a birthday. Whose birthday – anyone know? Who? Jesus? Are you sure? Yes, it is Jesus' birthday, and there is something very strange and something very important about us celebrating his birthday today because he was actually born about 2000 years ago.

There are two things to remember about birthdays and in particular, about Jesus' birthday, but first I want to tell you about something else.

In most of the C of E schools back in England and in most Canadian churches, there is what we call a pageant, a nativity play. Children dress up in costumes from the time when Jesus was born and they play the parts of everyone mentioned in the bible accounts.

Now you all know that there are animals mentioned in the story about Jesus being born, and you all know he was born in a stable, that's a place where they keep animals, and so in some pageants they actually have animals in the play. I remember many, many years ago helping Carol's Aunt Mimi load a live sheep into the back of her station wagon to take to the church pageant. What an experience!

Well, Fr. Tim Coonen, the wonderful RC priest in Dawson had an old dog, Buddy, a Golden Labrador, and everyone loved Buddy, so each year, Buddy got into the pageant too, usually wearing a set of antlers or big ears to make him into a reindeer, or a sheep or a goat, and when the pictures of Buddy came up on the screen, everyone laughed.

And every year we would look for the newest born baby in town and ask the mother to loan us the child to play the part of the baby Jesus and when those pictures came up of the baby in the arms of a little Mary, or lying in his crib, everyone would ooh and aah.

Well, there was a standard sort of pageant put on in a church school one day, and as the preparations were being made little Bobby made it well known that he wanted the part of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Unfortunately, when the teacher was handing out the parts, Bobby did not become Joseph; instead he became the inn keeper. Along came the night of the performance. All the parents and families were there. Every parent hoped and prayed that their child would not mess up or forget their lines. All Bobby had was one little line. The only thing he had to say was "Sorry there is no room in the inn, but you can go into the stable." That's all.

Well Joseph and a very pregnant Mary arrived at the innkeeper's door and knocked loudly. Bobby answered the door and Joseph asked for a room. But instead of his one line, Bobby said, "Mary, you can come right in, but not you, I wanted the part of Joseph and so you have to stay out." Well, the audience dissolved in laughter and the teacher had to rescue the scene and eventually the whole pageant was over. That's the time when teachers say, "I'll never put on another nativity play ever again."

But as you heard in the gospel reading and as you all know, Jesus actually was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn. That's why we show him here in the manger – you know what a manger is – a rack where they put the hay for the animals to eat out of. And look at all the people who came to see him.

Now everyone has been to birthday parties, right? You are invited and you arrive and you bring a present for the person having the birthday and there are candies and drinks and cake and a lot of good fun. But have you ever been to a birthday party where all the guests bring presents and they give them to each other, and none to the birthday person?

Isn't that what we do at Christmas, at Jesus' birthday? We give each other gifts. But what would Jesus want as a gift from you? What Jesus wants from us for his birthday present is our prayers, our love, and our hearts. He wants us to love him and talk to him, and trust him and let him be part of our everyday life.

The second important thing to remember about birthdays is that we only have birthdays for living people. Once a person dies, we don't have birthday parties for them anymore, do we? We may remember the day they were born, or even the day they died, but we don't have a birthday party for them. In the church we remember very holy and important people who we call saints on the anniversary of the day they died. For example, next week we will remember the life and witness of St. Thomas a Becket on the 29th of December, the day he died way back in 1170, but we don't remember his birthday.

So what is my point? It's this. Jesus' birthday is no different than any other birthday because Jesus is still alive; remember, he rose from the dead, he is with us still in the Holy Spirit, and he still takes part in people's lives. So it's right and proper to have a birthday party for him.

In the early years of the Christian Church, Gnosticism (that means having so-called secret knowledge) gave rise to the heresy of "Docetism," from the Greek *dokeo* which means "to seem." This heresy, that's a false belief, taught that Jesus never had any real human body, but just sort of flitted over the earth like a ghost. So it is interesting to note that in our familiar "Apostles' Creed" the phrase "born of the Virgin Mary", was inserted in the first place, not to emphasize the word "virgin," but rather to emphasize the word "born."

Lest you think that this theological debate is all long, long ago and far away, may I hasten to suggest that there are still a lot of happy Gnostics and Docetists among us. The theology of Mary Baker Eddy which forms the basis of Christian Science certainly is Gnosticism. So is Scientology even if a so-called film celebrity believes it.

Sadly, for many people who have not been raised in the Church and have not been taught properly about our Lord, their popular piety often involves a Gnostic Christ who never really quite touches this earth.

When the British mystery writer and lay theologian Dorothy Sayers' famous cycle of plays "The Man Born to be King" was first performed on the radio in England (in 1941), there were strong protests. Mr. J.W. Welch, then director of Religious Broadcasting for the BBC had this to say of the critics: "The disturbing feature of the opposition was its revelation of a widespread and seriously defective theology of the Incarnation. The Word was made flesh'- how many of us dare believe that?" Welch went on, "Some listeners were quite incapable of believing that Christ laughed, said Good Morning,' or was in any sense fully human."

But he was and he did.

We, who know Jesus, who worship this Son of God, come to earth as a real human being, who truly was born of Mary, we know better.

And so we gather here this morning to worship Jesus and to celebrate his birthday. Like Mary and Joseph, let us faithfully and obediently, give our lives and our hearts to Jesus, and allow him to guide us every day for the rest of our life.

May God enrich all of you, your families and friends, with his special gift to you of himself born this day. Amen.

Dismissal:

Return now to your places but as you leave, and go out into the world: Expect great things from God, and attempt great things for God.