

Before I begin, a disclaimer- I have preached many times about my mother, including some of the Christmas homilies, only because, as I have said, she is such a rich source of material. So, if you are tired of hearing about my mother- first of all, my apologies, and secondly, you may want to put your fingers in your ears, or you can always read the bulletin. For the rest of you...

My mom was born in Tripoli in Libya in North Africa- her family emigrated there from Sicily, looking for work and not finding any and being peasants as much there as they were in Sicily. But when you're desperate, you gotta do something.

And she tells stories of her family being harassed by the people in the surrounding villages who were native to that country, and don't think the Italians were blameless in that- they harassed the Libyans as well.

And the irony was that they were all in the same boat- they all lived in extreme poverty-having only one or two changes of clothes and most of the children not having shoes and all of them being hungry so much of the time- having to eat things like animals they could catch like porcupines and eating pasta with worms in it (from the worms in the flour that they were too poor to throw away)- a far cry from the feasts we will all enjoy this Christmas.

And they got through. Life was hard- very hard- but they raised their families and they did what they had to do to survive, and the children played and they all laughed. My mother once spoke of how simple life was then and how they didn't worry too much about what the day would bring and what tomorrow would bring. This was life and God would provide and God would make sure they had what they needed, even if it was not what we would think today was necessary to survive.

Which, whether they knew it or not, was central to the two faiths that were practiced there- the Moslem faith, of course, which emphasizes the will of God and the necessity to follow the will of God, whatever that may be; and the Catholic faith, which revolves around the fact that God has come among us, and that God is still among us, and that if you want to be happy you better see things from God's perspective, and not necessarily your own.

*"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"*

Emmanuel- God is with us- a profoundly beautiful notion, but one that is increasingly difficult to accept as we see all the suffering and all the pain all around us. We're not in Libya in the 1940's and we so don't so see all this as life being life and just accept it- we rail against it, as we should, but we never move on and have peace with it. But what we celebrate once again this evening is that God is with us, and so we have no reason to be afraid.

Because Christmas is not just a memory of a divine birth and the awe and wonder accompanying that- it is an ongoing and endlessly renewed affirmation that God chose to enter our reality- to take on our human condition- to be with us- in the suffering and in the pain of so many people in the world.

The God who humbled himself to not only become one of us- which is amazing in itself given what it means to be human- but to enter the world as a baby- a vulnerable, helpless infant- to a people that were persecuted and misunderstood and even hated- who worked extremely hard just to survive and were hungry more often than not, but also in a world that celebrates when it can- a world of community and family and solidarity and trust in the Lord.

He came to us and He continues to come to us every day and every moment into our hearts, to heal us and to comfort us and to lift us up, to give us hope, to share in our sufferings and our burdens and to make life, at the very least, a little more bearable.

One of the guys in our Men's Group- *break for a commercial- the Men's Group meets every second Saturday of the month at 7:30 A.M. in the parish center and we always have a great conversation, so come and join us!*- one of the guys shared a meditation on "Christ in the rubble", which referred to the manger scene that the Lutheran church in Bethlehem has put up for the Christmas season this year. The statue of the baby Jesus lies not in a manger, but rather in the rubble of a demolished building, which is the reality of the children living and being born in Palestine as we speak.

But, the pastor said, this also represents the hope that "*as the infant Jesus is born in the rubble, a new light (will shine forth) amidst the pain.*" God is with us, and He is crying with us as we cry, and He is rejoicing with us as we rejoice.

Enjoy this Christmas- you more than deserve it- just don't forget those who struggle and who have a difficult time getting through life as you do so. God is with us- and we can't thank God enough for that.