

[Isaiah 9:1-6; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14]

WELCOME TO EVERYONE WHO IS JOINING US FOR CHRISTMAS!

You may be home from the military, college, visiting your family, returning from out of state, or were moved by the Spirit and are looking for a spiritual home. You will find in yesterday's weekly parish bulletin an article written by our Parish Nurse, who is also our Christian Service Director, Mrs. Renee' Heileman.

She summarizes a talk given by at Sacred Heart Seminary, by Sally McCuen, from the Fr. Solanus Casey Center. In the article, Renee' shares her own reflections. She gave me permission to use some of them in my homily for this year's homily for the Children's Christmas Mass, with a few Fr. Nick twists.

Christmas is a great burst of Divine Love and Light into this world. Of course that Love and Light is Jesus Christ. His presence changed everything. He gave us hope and meaning. No longer was life just about our time on this earth, but it was about getting closer to God and anticipating a time of spending eternity with Him in Heaven. We need to welcome Jesus into our hearts, though, to give us the grace to receive that gift. The Blessed Mother of Jesus, Mary, said "yes" to God's request to bring His Son into the world. Her womb became a blessed place for Jesus to grow in preparation of becoming our Savior. We call this Incarnation: the act of the Word becoming flesh, God becoming human.

Tonight, we heard the story of Christ's birth and of His mother placing Baby Jesus in a manger. Do you know what a manger is? It comes from the French word for an animal's feeding trough: *mangier*. This same word is used by Italians to command us to eat: *Mangia! Mangia!* Can you imagine your mom or dad bringing your new baby brother or sister home and putting the baby in a doggie dish or a cat food dish? That's the kind of crib Baby Jesus had.

What makes up a manger? If you had to build one, what materials would you use? In the time of Jesus, most mangers were built of wood and were filled with straw or hay for the animals to eat. Besides that, in order to fit Baby Jesus, it has to be EMPTY. It has to be STURDY. It has to be SOFT and COMFORTABLE. It has to BE STILL. And it has to be READY.

When Mary, the Mother of Jesus, said YES to receiving the Baby Jesus inside of her, in one sense, she became a manger for her baby. This Christmas, how can you and I become a manger to hold Baby Jesus in our hearts?

1. Empty ourselves. Get rid of all the busyness going on in our minds, the worries about creating a 'perfect' holiday, the little aggravations nagging at us, or whatever is consuming our thoughts and energy. If we can do this for at least a little while, it will leave us fully open to Jesus' presence in our lives.

2. Be sturdy. Mangers are usually made of wood and are strong enough to safely hold a baby. We must be tough enough not to break under the pressure of the secular world's push to only make this a commercial holiday. Be strong to keep holiness alive in ourselves and community.

3. Be soft and comfortable. Hay softened the bed of our Lord. Although we need to be strong in our defense of keeping faith in Christmas, we also have to be kind and loving. This can make us and others more open to Jesus' message of love.

4. Be still. As I said earlier it is important sometimes for us to empty ourselves, but it is difficult to do that if we don't stop all of our activity once in a while and just be still. This calms our minds and makes us more open to receiving inspiration from the Holy Spirit. This helps us to be filled with insight and motivation to share with others.

5. Be ready. None of the above things will happen if we are not ready to accept Jesus and His grace in our lives. We must reject the idea that the world can give us what we need for true happiness. Only relationship with our Lord will do that. That relationship will help us through both good and bad times.

Take a few minutes to read the bulletin and consider these points this Christmas week. Warmly welcome Jesus into your heart and life, maybe just a little different than you have in the past. As you exit church tonight, be sure to take as our gift to you a copy of a book that talks about the main points of our Catholic Faith and of our Catholic Mass, plus a card to fill out and return to us. Merry Christmas! AMEN!