

Merry Christmas everyone! What a wonderful gift the children have given us in their delightful presentation of our special Christmas gospel tonight. If your heart wasn't warmed by that, then I will pray for you, since there must be something cold inside that needs to warm up.

I've noticed though, that the world is desperate for special occasions, for something special to lift us out of our daily existence, even for just a short time.

At this time of year, even as many people in the world have turned away from organized religion, they are still looking for something to believe in.

Recently, I have seen so many non-Christian friends celebrating the "winter Solstice" just like in pagan Roman times. As if the tilt of the earth in its orbit that makes December 21<sup>st</sup> the longest night of the year each year could somehow change our lives.

The folks on the old TV show, "Seinfeld", made up a feast called "Festivus", just to have something to celebrate in December for people with no faith and even though it was a joke for a TV show, it has actually been adopted by thousands of people because they are so hungry for something special in their lives.

We choose beauty queens, and elect homecoming kings and queens, we make big fusses over anniversaries, centennials and millenniums, even though we mostly don't really know when some things actually got started. We don't even really know the exact date of Jesus' birthday and yet we make a huge fuss over the date instead of thinking about the event.

We love to celebrate something out of the ordinary because human nature always seems to be dissatisfied with ordinary things and ordinary lives, even though those ordinary lives may be filled with blessings. It's like if it doesn't have bright colours and loud noises then it can't be special!

We allow ourselves to get so stressed out over all the external trappings of Christmas, we kind of miss the point sometimes or get so caught up in the wrong details that things get crazy!

I know a lady who always waited until the last minute to send out her Christmas cards. She had forty-nine people on her list, so she rushed into a store and bought a package of fifty cards without really looking at them.

When she got home, she wrote the addresses on forty-nine envelopes and then signed all the cards quickly, one after the other, without even reading the message inside.

On Christmas Day when things had quieted down somewhat, she noticed the one leftover card and she finally read the message she had sent to forty-nine of her friends. Imagine the sinking feeling in her stomach when she read the words...

"This Christmas card is just to say  
A little gift is on the way."

We put so much pressure on ourselves to get just the right decorations and presents and food and we even put ourselves in financial pressure for months afterward to pay for it all.

I saw a sign in a department store which said, "Make this Christmas one you'll remember for a long time, put everything on credit!!"

But Christmas is such a special feast because we remember God came to earth, we celebrate that God remembered his promise to save us from our original sin, and we rejoice that He became one of us, to suffer as we have, to die as we all will, and to pave the way for eternal life together with him in heaven.

But the first Christmas wasn't a huge planned party! The stable and manger were pretty ordinary, in fact much worse than ordinary. Most mothers wouldn't have chosen to travel when their baby was due like Mary and Joseph were forced to by the Romans, and they certainly would have hoped for a more comfortable place to give birth.

Jesus' life was simple, not glorified, growing up as a tradesman's son, and when he went out into the world with his message, he walked around, he didn't have golden chariots and trumpets leading the way. There were no "messiah jingles" on the radio, no pop-up announcements on the internet.

Yet that birth and that life were more important than anything else in history.

This is the time of year when gifts become very important. A grandmother I know was telling me that she took her four-year-old granddaughter to "big church" for the first time on Christmas Eve.

The little girl was very good and sat quietly, taking in all the people, the music, the decorations and she paid close attention to what was happening.

When she heard the priest say, "We thank You, Lord, for Your presence among us", the little girl's eyes flew open and she whispered to her grandmother, "Granny, we're all gonna get presents!"

And we will get a present tonight, just as we do at each and every Eucharist. We will receive the gift of God, which was the greatest gift ever, but it was very ordinary, just plain bread and wine.

We won't give you the host on this Christmas night in a small velvet-lined box, wrapped with red paper and a ribbon and a bow, not because the Eucharist doesn't deserve special treatment, but only because nothing we could do could make it any more special than it is, the very body of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

I imagine most of us would make a special effort to go a party if we knew there was a really good present waiting for us when we got there and yet too many of us don't take advantage of the chance to receive the greatest gift ever by coming to mass each and every week to be fed with the best food of all. The food that can change our lives and give us strength.

Food is very important at a feast, and it's important at Christmas, and every cultural tradition has a particular dish that signifies Christmas in our hearts. Sadly, the preparation of this food can also stress us out when it should be providing us joy!

Have you ever wondered why stressed-out people eat more desserts? It's because "stressed" spelled backwards is "desserts."

So, as we go to the trouble of preparing ever bigger and more elaborate celebrations to lift us out of the ordinary, we can also try to remember how ordinary the birth and life and gift of Jesus was, and yet how extra-ordinary our lives have become because of it.

It's not the date, or the solstice, or the snow, or the carols, or the dinners that make Christmas special, but only the simple presence of Jesus, who came into our lives as an ordinary baby so many years ago.