# Jim's Sermon - Christmas Eve Service – December 24, 2023

Several years ago, our family took a train trip through the southern US. We ended up spending the day in Juarez, Mexico the Sunday before Christmas. The Catholic Cathedral there has Masses all day, and they were all packed. We were fortunate to get seats at one of the morning services presided over by the local Bishop. At the end of the service there was a hushed anticipation. We weren't sure what was going on, then the bishop began to speak. In my very poor Spanish, I was able to discern that this was the Sunday when someone from each family in the town came with the baby Jesus figure from their home creche to be blessed by the bishop. Through the few words I caught, I realized that the bishop was telling the people that they should beware of superstition, that the little plaster Jesus was only an object, and that they needed to keep their eyes on the real thing, on Jesus, who was a spirit.

When the time came for the blessing several hundred hands holding little baby Jesus' flew into the air. Arms were stretched as far as they could go, as if the closer to the bishop one held the figure, the better. I couldn't help thinking that the bishop's words weren't as important to the people as his blessing was.
I suspect that for those families in Ciudad Juarez, the creche and the blessed baby Jesus they contained were essential to ensuring that Jesus would be born into their homes that Christmas.

Symbols have power.

One of the problems with religion in western societies is that we have come to depend so much on reason. . . and religion (the process of touching into the spiritual) is not rational. The rational mind divides reality into the material and the spiritual, Faith and reason, science and mysticism. We hold these two apart as if they were the positive and negative wires on a battery recharger. As if something terrible might happen if they ever touched. Indigenous cultures have no such problem in seeing that everything is connected, that everything is a part of

everything else. That the little ceramic Jesus in the homes of the people of Juarez is more than a representation. Not the same as the physical Jesus, but something powerful, that allows the people a way to enter into the holy.

The Eastern Orthodox Church has always understood this as well. Their sacred Icons are painted by people who are specially prepared to do so, and the process of painting them is a very prayerful one. The icons that adorn Greek and Ukrainian and Syrian Churches are believed to be portals into the spiritual realm.

All of the sacramental churches (orthodox, catholic and Anglican) have retained this connection between the material and the spiritual through our understanding of the sacraments, especially holy communion as doorways into communion with the divine. And the more we are able to let go of our need to rationalize everything, to enter in with our hearts, the more we are able to experience Jesus in the bread and wine that we offer on the altar.

This, of course is what Christmas (the nativity of Jesus) is all about. It is the celebration of the cosmic event in which the Divine being who created the universe, became enfleshed in a human baby. And why exactly did God choose to become human if not to show that there is no separation between the divine and the human, the material and spiritual, that everything is imbued with a divine consciousness.

Traditional societies have always understood this as part of their culture. And we in the west have somehow missed this fundamental message from our own Judeo-Christian roots.

We are body-spirit unities. As Thomas Aquinas said, we cannot experience faith or anything for that matter that does not start in our physical senses. Think about how as a child (and hopefully as an adult) you reacted when you saw the first Christmas tree of the year, or a beautiful display of Christmas lights or whatever it is that best represents this season to you. Your heart beat a little faster, your eyes

dilated, maybe you felt a little flutter in your chest. Our minds, hearts and spirits are not unconnected, they are all parts of the whole that is us. But we need to keep our hearts and minds open, we need to cultivate our spiritual sensitivity to the world of things. If we don't do so we risk losing the wonder of childhood, the ability to allow our imaginations to carry us away.

Christmas is a time when we all want to experience this wonder and imagination in a special way, to imagine a world where the lion will lie down with the lamb, where peace and hope will displace violence and despair. Where human beings treat one another as brothers and sisters.

Christmas has emerged out of a crazy mix of symbols and traditions from a variety of cultures, (from the Celts, the Vikings, the ancient Romans, the Medieval French and Dutch) to become a universal celebration of wonder and imagination and hope. And in this way Christmas belongs to everyone who holds in their hearts a core belief in the power of good over evil and love over fear.

I invite you this Christmas to choose one symbol that represents all of the elements of Christmas and to hold the image of that symbol in the imagination of your heart. Let it heal you, let it give you hope, let it heighten your sensitivity to all that is good in your life, and let it fill you with gratitude.

And so, we ask a blessing on this creche. We ask a blessing on all animals and those who love them and work with them. We ask a blessing on those in power, that they might govern with a servant's heart. We ask a blessing on families, especially those struggling in these difficult economic times, and we ask a blessing on ourselves, that the spirit of Christmas, of generosity might be more than a holiday for us but might become a new way of life.