

Christmas homily

18 words...18 words tell the whole story. 18 words

She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn.

These 18 words from scripture simply, yet eloquently states what lies deepest within human life. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn.

It is not those who sit at the center of things, the powerful, the rich, the famous, the government leaders, the entertainment celebrities, the corporate heads, the scholars and academics, who ultimately sit at the center of life. What is deepest and most meaningful inside of life lies in anonymity, unnoticed by the powerful, tenderly swaddled in faith, outside the city.

Being rejected by the city of Bethlehem also foreshadowed his death. Jesus' earthly life will end as it began. He will be a stranger, an outsider, crucified outside the city of Jerusalem just as he was born outside the city of Bethlehem.

These 18 words: "she gave birth to a son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room in the inn", invites us, challenges us to answer a question: For the one whose birth we celebrate tonight and for his followers, "How do we measure success?"

Someone who has reflected on this question is Fr. Greg Boyle Jesuit priest. Over twenty years ago he became pastor of a parish in Los Angeles. It was primarily an Hispanic community. There were over 40 gangs in his neighborhood.

He began Homeboy Industries for young people who wanted to break out of gang life. During those 20 years he also buried over 150 people violently killed on the streets.

In his book, Tatoos on the Heart, Fr. Greg would reflect on what success is all about for a follower (that's us!) of the one whose birth we celebrate this evening. Much of Fr. Greg's work involved seeking funds from grants from foundations. Most groups who were giving grants, wanted outcomes; measurable outcomes; they wanted to see success stories.

Eventually Fr. Greg came to the conclusion that “ the world's definition of “success” has little in common with living the gospel. Success for the follower of Christ means standing with the outcast. Jesus just stood with the outcast, the sinners, the crippled the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the blind...and he just stood with them until they were welcomed ... or until he was crucified----which ever came first.

We need to stand in solidarity with the enslaved, and by so doing, we diminish evil's ability to stand.” After working with the gang members who came to Homeboy Industries he came to this conclusion: “We see in the homies what they don't see in themselves, until they do.”

Can we stay faithful and persistent in our fidelity even when things seem not to succeed?

Jesus stood with those marked as unclean (the poor, the sinners, the tax collectors) until they came to see that they were sons and daughters of the most high God.

What does all this have to do with the birth of Jesus which we celebrate today? One of our major preoccupations in America is with being successful... the American dream. We measure our success on how much money we make at our job, the size of our house or the kind of car we drive.

Yet when Jesus in whom the fullness of God dwells as well as the fullness of humanity, came into this world, he did not come clothed with the wrappings of worldly success. But he DID

come into the world with a mother who lovingly wrapped him in swaddling clothes, as was the custom of the day, and found a place, humble though the manger might have been, to rest his head. He was in solidarity with all humanity. A solidarity which would last the whole of his life... a solidarity which would last forever.

The words of today's scriptures are stark: "She gave birth to a son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the inn."

Tonight we celebrate God's solidarity with all humanity through the birth of his son. May we fully celebrate this feast by committing ourselves to be in solidarity with all people. As St. Pauls would say, "Whether we are Jew or Greek, slave or free male or female, all are one in Christ Jesus" ...because Jesus became one with all of us.