

Homily for Christmas 2006

I have a little gift for you – it's a song –
but you might want to brace yourselves
because the lyrics may be considered controversial by some!

*Happy holidays! Happy holidays!
While the merry bells keep ringing, may your every wish come true.
Happy holidays! Happy holidays!
May the calendar keep bringing happy holidays to you!*

Now, in 1942 when Irving Berlin wrote that song and Bing Crosby sang it,
- no one got upset!
But that was, as they say, "back in the day..."
Should we say, "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays"?

Of course, the origin of the word "holiday" -IS- "holy day."
But if we went around greeting each other with "Happy Holy Days"
that wouldn't pass the PC test.
The word "Christmas," like "holiday" is also a contraction of two words:
"Christ" and "Mass."
What used to be "Christ Mass Day" became "Christmas Day."
In our own times, some might feel brave, even a little zealous,
by greeting folks with "Merry Christmas!"
But it seems to me that our faith as Christians,
our faith as those who consider Christ Mass Day a Holy day,
asks a lot more of us than saying "Merry Christmas."

Suppose we were to take the meaning of this day a little more seriously
and greet one another in that spirit.
This day is about peace, faith, love, mercy...
Suppose we began to include those realities in our Christmas greetings.

You're talking to your neighbor and you say:
"Merry Christmas, Joe,
and I really hope that Christmas brings you more of God's peace..."

(Now, THAT would take courage to say!)

Or you've finished putting the gifts under the tree and you say to your spouse,
"Merry Christmas, honey,
and please forgive me for being a jerk this afternoon..."

You're a boy or a girl on Christmas morning opening presents
and you turn to your brother or sister and say,
"Merry Christmas - do you want to play with some of things I got?"

You realize that much, if not most of your Christmas spending
has been for others who already have more than they need
so before December 31 you write a check for a charitable purpose
and help sustain the Christmas spirit through the mission of the gospel.
"Merry Christmas!"

You're at a Christmas party and in a cocktail debate about the war in Iraq.
A newcomer joins the group and says, "Merry Christmas" and all reply the same
-
then you go back to talking about war...

You ask yourself, and then the others,
"War and Christmas... How do we do them both at the same time?"

You're going to Christmas dinner and you know you're going to see
that friend or family member you've had a fight with
and so on the way you practice saying,
"Merry Christmas - and look, I'm sorry about this thing between us -
maybe we can start of the new year as friends again."

And since it is Jesus' birthday, after all, you find a few quiet minutes
today, tonight or tomorrow to sit and pray and say,
"Merry Christmas, Lord - happy birthday! Can we talk for a while?"

Saying "Merry Christmas" like that
takes time, takes humility, takes courage, takes love, takes generosity,
and takes us to the heart of what Christmas is all about:
reconciling and sharing the love of God
which is given to us in Christ Jesus.

There's no box or bag big enough
to hold the best and most important Christmas gifts.
No store or website sells what the human heart wants and needs the most.
No gift is greater than the ways in which we of ourselves to family and friends
and strangers around the world so much in need of a share in our bounty.

Christmas is nothing if not this:
the celebration of God sharing himself with us in Christ,
freely, fully and generously.

And our Christmas celebration is empty if it is not
a celebration of our sharing ourselves with others,
freely, fully and generously – as Christ did for us.

And Christ continues, to this day, to share himself with us
in the gift of the Eucharist.
We go to his table now for the feast - the banquet - of Christ Mass Day.

May the food he gives us, the Bread of angels and the Cup of salvation,
feed our hearts' hunger for his loving presence.

Jim, let's reprise the song!

Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!
Christ Jesus is our Savior
born in Bethlehem this day.
Merry Christ-Mass! Merry Christmas!
May your "holiday" be HOLY;
Merry Christmas, now, to you!

-Rev. Austin Fleming
December 24, 2006