

December 23, 2007 Romans 1:1-7

Imagine you've been invited to a birthday party. You've bought a gift. You even show up early. But once the guest of honor arrives, no one sings happy birthday. No one presents his or her gifts. In fact, no one pays any attention to him at all! Why not? They were having so much fun celebrating; they entirely forgot why they were there.

Isn't that, unfortunately, what so many do with Christmas? Is it the season of Santa Claus and sleigh bells? Is it the season of good cheer, and "Cheers"? Is it a celebration of goodwill and charity? Or is it a birthday celebration, and if it is, **whose birthday are we celebrating?**

Why is celebrating Jesus' birth such a special event for us Christians? "**As to His human nature, he was a descendant of David.**" (v. 3) Jesus' human descent is traced from Adam, through Abraham, through Judah, through King David, through his human mother, Mary, and legally through his stepfather, Joseph. Jesus is true man. God designated Him as the second Adam, the representative of the human race, of whom God requires perfect love, obedience, and divine punishment for all disobedience.

But if Jesus is to be anyone who can undo the sin and curse Adam brought into the world, He had to be more than a perfect man. **Who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God, by His resurrection from the dead; Jesus Christ our Lord!** (v. 4) Human sons are always a generation younger than their fathers, but God's Son is "begotten of the Father from eternity." God the Father has a Son, and yet there remains one God. Human language cannot express the mysteries of the Trinity adequately. But we believe and trust God's promise that His Son would come into the world to save us from our sin's curse! In Jesus time and eternity, heaven and earth meet. In Jesus we contemplate a real human being, a person just like us with feelings, emotions and experiences. And in Him we meet God, the almighty, the all-knowing, the all present.

Why did God send His Son into the world? He came to save us from sin, its curse and power; from death, its condemnation and eternal punishment; and from the devil, his control and accusing power. I have tried, and you have too, to live up to God's holy expectations. And when I fail, regardless of how hard I try, I feel like giving up. I wonder whether I shouldn't just put on airs and self-righteously pretend to be someone I'm not, or whether I shouldn't just give in to sin and shame since I cannot perfect myself anyway. God's eternal Son became man to perfectly keep the Law, in His thoughts, words, behavior and attitudes, in our place. Now, the Lord promises us that by faith in Him we become the righteousness of God. God's eternal Son became man to go to the cross and suffer sin's punishment in our place. Paul writes in Galatians 3:13, **Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us.** Now God promises us that by faith in Him, we receive the forgiveness of all our sin that Jesus earned for us! Whose birthday are we celebrating? It's Jesus' birthday, true God and true man, who came to save us from our sins!

One Christian author, who had a salt-water aquarium, mused, "**You would think, in view of all the energy I expend on behalf of my fish, that they would at least be grateful. Not so. Every time my shadow looms above the tank, they dive for cover. They show me one emotion only - fear.**" Of course, the fish can't comprehend him or his actions. So he concluded, "To change their perception, I would have to become a fish and somehow speak to them in a language they could understand."

We humans hide and cower from God, afraid lest his perfect love expose and judge our imperfection and sin. So God became man and lived among us to bring us His grace and truth. "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father," Jesus said. "Now this is eternal life," Jesus

prayed, "that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." Through Jesus we can now know God, not in fear, but in faith!

True God became man to be our go-between, our mediator. Jesus is not an other-worldly God, but a this-worldly God. He is God in the flesh -- God close to us -- God who knows all about human life, its joys and sorrows, its good times and bad -- God who shares every moment of life with us, who knows what living in this world is all about, who knows what dying is all about. He cares for us. He helps us interpret the woes of life -- as effects of sin, as trials to strengthen faith, as God's way of warning us not to fall in love with this perishing world, as signposts show us we the Savior from sin. He prepares a home in heaven -- just right for us! Christians, celebrate Christmas as Jesus' birthday, the Son of God became Son of Man.

Celebrate it also as the birth of the Savior through whom we sons and daughters of man become children of God! How are we adopted as God's children? How do we remain in the family? **Through Him and for His name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.**" (v. 5) God called us to faith in Jesus through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Obey the gospel invitation! Believe in Jesus, and you have eternal life. Then by faith live an obedient and thankful life, following God's will and commands.

Paul continues with this thrilling message, **"You also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God, and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.** We belong to Jesus! To feel alone is one of the most painful experiences imaginable. One Christian recalled the deep sense of aloneness that swept over him during his first day in the military when he was exposed to almost constant cursing and foul language. People with physical disabilities have said that their greatest pain is loneliness. It is also felt by parents who have been neglected by their children, by husbands or wives who have lost their mate, and by people whom society shuts out.

Perhaps you've spent some time in the empty pit of loneliness. You were alone with your feelings, misunderstood, rejected. Even at a Christmas party, you can sense this loneliness if everyone else is laughing and having a great time, but nobody seems to care about you. You just don't fit in. Unfortunately, this describes so much of what life is like today. Relationships between people rarely go deeper than the feeling, "I care about you because you can do something for me." We use other people and are often used by them.

But in Christ's Church we are members of His family - Christ's people, belonging to Christ and belonging to each other. As we continue to know the miracle of Christ in Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit fills us with love for Jesus and with love and concern for others, not just for a season, but also throughout our lives.

One Christmas, some children were arranging figures of Mary, Joseph and the Christ-Child in the little manger scene in their home. They lit two candles to shine on the manger. One child excitedly said, "Be sure that Jesus shows!" In your Christmas celebration -- and in your Christmas living -- be sure that Jesus shows! After all, it's His birthday we celebrate! Amen.