

Homily for Christmas Eve
December 24, 2018
Daniel Fournier

Remember that Christmas Time Book and TV Special “How the Grinch Stole Christmas”? There have been several re-makes of this classic story. You know - the Jealous Critter, angry, heart full of hate, a miserable character. He hates the joy and cheer, the noise of Christmas so-much he devises a plan to ruin Christmas, to steal Christmas. He dresses up like Santa Claus and steals all the gifts set aside for the children. He steals all the decorations – everything related to Christmas.

A little girl discovers him, finds him out. Despite what the Grinch does, the people, unshaken by their loss, celebrate Christmas anyway. And shaken by this surprise, the Grinch has a conversion experience of sorts. In a sense a real classic story, from a classic storybook.

Yet, there are all sorts of grinches who steal Christmas. Just think of the moves to call it “Xmas” or the continual move to take Christ out of Christmas. Advent calendars used to have angels and shepherds, now they have Homer Simpson eating donuts and drinking beer. Or they have other cartoon characters that have no relationship whatsoever to the Christmas story. Less overtly, we are treated to phrases like “Happy Holidays” and “Season’s Greetings” or “Seasonal Music” or the seasonal department at Walmart or Lowes.

In a way, that’s robbery. After all, the only reason we are celebrating is a baby whose birth changed the course of history. That God would want to be that close to us, to take on our form, even to the vulnerability of such a little child. Even some theologians seem to steal Christmas away with pronouncements that such a miracle could never have happened.

Yet, like the young girl and all her friends in the Grinch story, the little ones, the little people, somehow celebrate Christmas anyway. Perhaps that’s how Christmas celebrations actually started in the early fourth or fifth century.

Up to this point, in the very early church's history the prime feast of the church was Easter. Christmas comes to be celebrated a little later. Some attribute its date being set by Pope Julius I in the mid-300s against the background of Roman cultural/pagan traditions centred on the sun and the earth's seasons for growing such as the festival set around the celebration of the Winter Solstice. It still took 200 more years for the firm establishment of Christmas as a date re-occurring annually. Council of Tours 567 established the twelve days of Christmas. Whichever way we look at it, Christmas has a varied history.

Three decades later, the Roman Empire followed suit. Commemorating the birth of Jesus spread throughout Europe, and by 600, Augustine of Canterbury’s emerging church in the British Isles baptized ten thousand converts on that Holy day. Still, for almost a millennium, Christmas was the special feast of the poor, the common people, and the little ones.

By the 1500s, however, with its political, national, and Church wars, Christmas was disappearing from many places. The Puritans condemned and abolished Christmas as something pagan and idolatrous. They even tried to make observing it a sin. In 1642, services were banned. No decorations were allowed. Two years later, Christmas was declared a time of fast and penance.

In 1647, the Grinch, in the form of The English Parliament, totally banned Christmas. Markets were ordered to stay open. Longer work hours were enforced. The little people did not like this at all. There were riots. Ten of thousands of people demonstrated.

Even in the 1700s, as Charles Wesley wrote "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," others professed: "There is no place for Christmas in the modern world." Christmas was outlawed in New England until the 1850s. People were forced to work that day. Children were ordered to school. Yet people in hiding, and sometimes in public, celebrated, Christmas, with goose and turkey, and a manger scene. And even today as we speak the question of decorations, colours, marking this special Holy day is being brought up for debate just down the road. As it was then, so it will be today.

There is a mystery in Christmas far brighter than presents, more persistent than the great wars or personal sorrows that seem to steal it away. Christmas is about the child who became the bread of life, the baby who beamed as the light of the world.

The Grinch, by the way, had a change of heart. Apparently, what did the trick was seeing the joy of children. And probably too, the song of the Angels!

And so, regardless of past or present wrongs, today we listen to the proclamation of the Angels. To you this night is born a Saviour. This Saviour is not to be-come, but is NOW. This promise brings all our hopes for the future into the present, and that is what the miracle of Christmas is. Oh yes, we can bemoan that "nothing has changed", that "there is still evil and hatred around".

But the Saviour, Emmanuel, GOD WITH US, is with us now. The miracle of God with us cuts through all that the world has to offer. If only we could see, if only we can hear, and only if we open our hearts to experience it. Let us do so this Christmas: by loving each other, in living God's dream, God's voice, listening to what the Child Jesus says to us, for what the child within us longs. True peace on earth, good will to all!

Have a blessed, joy-filled, child-like Christmas!