

If I asked, I bet most of you could name favorite Christmas memories. For my homily I would like to begin with one of mine – and it didn't even take place at Christmas. In 2008 I was blessed to be able to go as a chaplain on an Archdiocesan pilgrimage to the Holy Land. And one of the stops on the pilgrimage was at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. But there was nothing “Christmasy” about the experience, I thought that day, as we walked through the church. In fact, my attitude was I was just doing my duty. You see, I had been to the Holy Land and Bethlehem two years prior on my own. I had already been there. The church was large and ancient – but run down, even ugly. It was September, and at least 105 degrees that day as we waited for over an hour in line with hundreds of other pilgrims and tourists for a chance to visit briefly the cave that served as the stable in which Christ was born.

The Church of the Nativity is divided between the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Roman Catholic Churches. Space and time for praying is rigorously and jealously guarded. As we neared

the underground grotto a half dozen Catholic Franciscan Friars went into it. It was the Catholics' turn to pray. They started singing *Adeste Fideles* (Oh Come All Ye Faithful). We Catholic pilgrims started singing along until a Greek monk told us to be quiet. No singing allowed. Then a couple of Greek monks "invaded" the grotto during the Catholic's reserved time and started praying loudly. The Franciscans dragged them bodily back out – a small, depressing example of the inter-Christian friction that plagues the Holy Land. As I said, there was nothing "Christmasy" about my experience in Bethlehem.

Until, that is, I got my turn to worship in the actual cave. There, set in the floor of the cave under a small altar is a silver star, which believers touch and kiss. And on the star are written the Latin words, "Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus Est." "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary. And as I knelt down it suddenly struck me in a powerful way – Hic, HERE. I had been in the grotto on my previous pilgrimage. I had even offered mass in the grotto! But this time God gave me the grace to really

understand. Right here, Jesus was born. Those words would fit nowhere else on earth because Christianity is not a myth or legend. It is tied to history and geography. It's touchable. It's real.

In our celebrations of Christmas, we can have visions of the perfect Christmas – snowy vistas, houses decked with holly, the tastefully decorated Christmas tree. But there was absolutely none of that in Bethlehem that day. What there was, was the reminder of a fact that changed everything. Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary. God became Man to save us from death and sin.

Sometimes it's hard for us to believe in the reality of God's love for us. It's hard to accept that people as messed up as we are, with so many mistakes and sins, can be loved by God. Surely, He holds us at arms' length.

But stop and think of the silver star. As the Byzantine Liturgy says, "Rejoice, Jerusalem. All you lovers of Sion, share our festivities. On this day the age-old bonds of Adam's condemnation were broken, paradise was opened for us, the

serpent was crushed, and the woman, whom he once deceived, lives now as the Mother of the Creator.”

Today, in the middle of our messy lives, think of how God the Father has tried to show us His deepest love. He gave paradise to our first parents Adam and Eve. To Abraham He gave a covenant and promise. Through Moses He offered to lead His people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Over and over God tried to show the depths of His love for us. And we didn't get it. So finally, in the fullness of time, God sent His only Son to us as a baby. Nothing is more vulnerable than a baby. Nothing pulls us out of our self-centeredness like a baby. Nothing prompts love like a baby. The child born of the Virgin Mary at Bethlehem was God's one last attempt to convince us of His love for us.

That silver star on the floor of the grotto in Bethlehem, in the midst of our petty human sins, fighting monks, bored and sweaty pilgrims, more than any Hallmark Christmas card, is the perfect image of the reality of Christmas. Jesus comes to us, not because we deserve Him, but because we NEED Him.

But Jesus can't touch us at Christmas unless we accept that we need Him as our Savior. Have any of you adults ever said at this time of the year, "I don't need anything for Christmas?" Are you hard to buy for? That's not a child's attitude. Children know they need all sorts of things at Christmas. I once desperately needed a Minnesota Viking football helmet. I needed a Major Matt Mason Space Station, and a ten-speed bike. We can regret a too materialistic obsession in kids at Christmas, but at least they know they are poor – if only in material possessions.

We, too, are poor. We are in need. We're desperate – perhaps not for stuff. But we do need God's strength, peace, forgiveness, faith, and love for our messy lives. And when we recognize that, then through all our mess Christmas becomes good news. In Bethlehem a silver star still marks the spot where that good News became flesh – touchable and real. God became one of us to save us from our sins and offer us eternal life. So rejoice, Jerusalem. All you lovers of Sion and share our festivities, for it's Christmas. We have a Savior.