

Monsignor Dennis Sheehan

Homily Given on Christmas Day, 2008

Christmas plays and pageants are a common feature in many communities this time of year. I heard a story of a small parish which was having a Christmas pageant. The religious education director wanted to give everyone some part, however small. So she got Barry to play the innkeeper. Everyone loved Barry. He was a great kid. But everyone also knew that Barry wasn't the brightest lamp on the tree. He'd have to work hard to learn his lines. But he got the part: he was the innkeeper.

The idea was simple enough: Barry would open the door, listen to Joseph explain his situation. All he had to say was one line: "Sorry, we're full."

The play went on, and all went well. Barry listened as Joseph made his plea. "Sorry, we're full," he said. Joseph went on to plead, telling of Mary's need for rest after a long, hard journey. "Sorry, we're full," Barry repeated. But you could hear his voice begin to waver. The conviction was not so strong.

Joseph and Mary turned away, disappointed. Just as they headed across the stage into the night, our innkeeper's resolve collapsed completely. "Wait!" we heard him shout, "you can have my room!"

There's a good deal of the Christmas gospel in that little tale. Here's a heart full of generosity, nearly broken at the idea of turning away a needy couple. Can't you just imagine the troupe of pageant directors panicking as Barry took the tale in a whole new direction?

In the end, of course, there was not a dry eye in the house. The audience witnessed one of those unique moments that only grace and generosity can create.

Sure, Barry didn't follow the script. But our little innkeeper gave everyone a fleeting glimpse into a heart transformed by the coming of Jesus Christ. St. Paul tells us that, in Jesus, the grace of God appears. Barry tells us that, in hearts attuned to the heart of Jesus, grace is still appearing, in that generous and giving behavior Christmas continues to engender. Against the background of a scary economy and a recession that has seen lots of job loss, look at how the grace of God is still appearing.

Those bell ringers with stories of their own turn out in cold and snow to collect for others poorer than they. Our parishioners this year have collected hundreds of toys and articles of clothing. Your goodness made it all possible. Volunteers went to shelters and food banks to prepare and distribute tons of food.

Don't forget the dollars that slipped out of your wallets to church and charity, to street people and charitable appeals. You yourselves have been – even this difficult Christmas – what St. Paul would call "the grace of God appearing." It's all around us. It's the errand run for an elderly neighbor. You put up with constant chatter of your garrulous cousin. Are these things too little? Remember that the child of Bethlehem – God's grace appearing – came among us small and poor, a wanderer and homeless. God's appearing in our world is often like Christmas, small and negligible. If eternity comes tonight into our world nestled in an infant's blanket, doesn't that say that no gift, no deed is too small to bear the overwhelming power of Christ's transforming love?

The message? Focus at Christmas on the smallest joy and the littlest gifts. These are all signs to you and me – and the whole earth with us – that come from the joy and grace of God. With that in mind, this is my prayer: God grant you the light of Christmas which is faith,

The warmth of Christmas which is love,
The radiance of Christmas which is purity,
The hope of Christmas which is forgiveness,
The belief of Christmas which is truth,
The all of Christmas which is Christ.

For all the Barrys this year, in whom grace has once again appeared, let us give thanks to the Lord our God.