

Advent 4, Year C December 24, 2006 Cathedral Church of St. Paul

This time of the year, more than any other time of the year, is an occasion for parties. Businesses have parties. Schools have parties.

Families and friends have parties. Almost everybody gives or attends at least one party during December.

I, for one, am glad for this. I am not naïve enough to think that all of these parties reflect the true meaning of Advent & Christmas.

Nevertheless, it is good to know that our Lord's birth is the inspiration of more festivities than any other event in history. For all of these centuries, this has been a season for celebration.

Our Gospel reading for today reports what may have been the very first Christmas party. It wasn't big or elaborate. The guest list was quite

small; only two people attended this party. One was named Elizabeth. She would soon give birth to a baby boy, who would become John the Baptist.

The other was named Mary. She had just learned that she would also have a son, who would be the Savior of the world.

It was a time to celebrate. And these two women did exactly that.

The account that we have of their time together is ever so brief, but the tone of it all is excitement and gladness. They shouted. They sang. And we can safely assume that they also laughed, and danced and embraced.

It was party time~Elizabeth said the baby in her womb jumped with joy!

What was it that these two women were celebrating? They possessed no wealth. The luxuries of modern life, that have become necessities for most of us, were totally unknown to them. If we had to live

now the way they lived then, we would probably feel so cheated and mistreated that celebrating would be completely out of the question. But Mary and Elizabeth were absolutely bursting with excitement and gladness.

The difference between them and us lies in two different realms.

One is the tools, machinery, and gadgets that we use to take some of the toil out of life. In this realm, our way of living is clearly superior to theirs.

We would not and should not renounce the advantages that science and technology have placed in our hands. These are the means by which we live.

But the other realm is the purposes, the causes, the faith and hope for which we live. And for us to claim superiority in this realm would

demonstrate our arrogance, or ignorance, or both. Mary and Elizabeth saw themselves as willing instruments in the hands of God. He was at work in and through their lives to advance his purpose in the world.

How many of us dare to think of ourselves in terms such as that? When was the last time you took note of some event in your life and thought to yourself, God is at work? Our problem is not theoretical atheism. We believe in God, and I do not doubt the sincerity of our faith. But most of us would be a bit surprised to find the God in whom we believe, actually doing something.

He used to do things. We do not have any doubt about that. And some day, somewhere, somehow, He will become active again. Of this, we are reasonable sure. But in the meantime, for practical purposes, our

God might as well be on a temporary leave of absence. We seldom, if ever, see any thing of which we would say, "God did that." We rarely have our spirits lifted by the thought of His presence and power.

If we can see a solution to our problem, we are hopeful. If no solution is apparent, we fall into despair. If we have enough money and people to do the job, we tell ourselves we are encouraged. But let there be a shortage of either and we become discouraged. One could easily suppose that everything depends of human effort, and God has nothing to do with anything.

Mary and Elizabeth, for all of their simple life style, were way ahead of us on this score. Their God was not absent but present, not passive but active. He was at work in their lives and in their world. They had felt his

presence. They had heard His voice. They had witnessed His deeds. And for that, for them, was sufficient cause for celebration.

This, of course, did not mean that all of their problems were solved and all of their struggles were over. The path that lay ahead for both of these women would lead through places of indescribable pain. Elizabeth's baby would eventually have his head severed from his body and served on a platter to a drunken, decadent crowd. Mary's baby would live for thirty-three years, and then be nailed to a cross, and left there to die. The celebration that took place that day in the Judean hills was very premature. But they celebrated, nevertheless, and that was the appropriate thing for them to do.

Most celebrations are premature. A young couple stands at a church altar and pledge their mutual love for as long as they both shall live. Friends and families laugh and cry, kiss the bride and congratulate the groom, propose toasts and throw rice. But the thoughtful wedding guests also pray and hope. They know this happy marriage has a fifty per cent chance of ending in divorce. They know the possibilities for misery are just as great as the possibilities for wedded bliss. Still they celebrate, and that they should. Celebrations are not only because of; they are also in spite of. If we waited until all of the problems were solved and all of the questions answered, if we celebrated nothing but final outcomes and happy endings, we might never celebrate at all.

Today is the fourth and final Sunday of Advent...that season of the church year when we prepare for and await the coming of the Christ child.

He came into the world a long time ago. He came to Mary and Joseph, to the shepherds and the Wise Men, to the early disciples and the first apostles. But what about you and me? Has he come to us? Can we depend on his presence? Will He be there when we need Him most?

The Bible says He will. The saints say He will-that He will come to us just as He came to them. But in the last analysis, this question must be answered by faith. The presence of Christ cannot be proven. It can only be experienced. My suggestion is this: that we exercise our faith; that we join Mary and Elizabeth and celebrate the coming of our Lord, even though that celebration may seem a bit premature.      AMEN