

REFLECTIONS ON CHRISTMAS

There have been 8 Christmas homilies, including 2017, on the Bethany Ministries website - all in the Sunday Homilies section. The stories and reflections have far from exhausted the meaning or the mystery of the feast or the season. In this reflection I want to give some personal background to a thread that runs through many of them.

When I was a boy in the 1950's, the pastor of the parish where I grew up would give a similar sermon every Christmas. I was always there, either as a member of the boys choir or as an altar server. He would always refer to the phrase, "*Peace on earth to men of good will,*" a literal translation of the Latin words the choir was singing, "*pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.*" His interpretation was that we had to be good before we could receive the peace the angels were singing about.

As a child, I worked at being very good, especially around Christmas, and heard the Monsignor's words amplified by the popular Christmas song, *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town*, "He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake." But I was never totally comfortable with that, and as I grew up and studied Scripture in the Seminary, I became less and less comfortable with the idea that I had to be good to receive God's gifts.

When the English translation of the prayers of the Mass was published & approved in 1973, I was delighted to see that phrase in the *Gloria* translated as "*peace to his people on earth,*" especially since it was the phrase most often repeated in sung versions of it. This translation was used to better reflect the words of the Gospel of Luke in contemporary translations of the New Testament by both Catholic and Protestant scholars, "*peace to those on whom his (God's) favor rests,*" [New American Bible & Catholic Lectionary] or "*on earth, peace among those whom he (God) favors*" [New Revised Standard Version].

I was very disappointed when, in 2011, the revised translation went back to the words "*and on earth, peace to people of good will,*" reflecting a literal translation of the Latin, which was based on the Vulgate version of Jerome, a translation that was later corrected in both Protestant and Catholic Bibles.

Why is this important? Because the way we pray, in words and especially in song, affects the way we believe and act. There is an old Latin proverb, "*Lex orandi, lex credendi,*" [the law of praying is the law of believing]. The way we pray influences the way we believe.

When I began to unwrap the mystery of Christmas in homilies, the theme of receiving the gift of God's love without earning or deserving it found many expressions.

In 2013, I compared the song, "*Santa Claus is Comin' to Town*" to another Christmas song, "*Here Comes Santa Claus*" composed by Gene Autry in 1947. In that song he sings, "*He doesn't care if you're rich or poor for he loves you just the same. Santa knows that we're God's children, that makes everything right.*"

Then I told the story of La Befana, the Italian legend of a magical figure who gives gifts to all the children, rich & poor, good or bad, because any one of them could be "the divine child who will change the whole world." You can check out that homily by going to [Christmas 2013](#).

In 2016, Anna and I told the story of "*Old Turtle and the Broken Truth*." This balanced the emphasis on peace and truth as totally free gifts. The truth "*You are loved*" has to be connected to the rest of the truth "*And so are they*" in order for peace to be fully received. The story, told in the homily for [Christmas 2016](#) in Delanson has been revised, and was used in Middleburgh in 2017. We also used it in a performance in the village library during "Miracle on Main Street."

As 2017 ended, I wove the two threads together - and spoke of the free gift of peace - that needs to be unwrapped in order to be fully realized in the homily for [Christmas Day 2017](#). I still won't say or sing "on earth, peace to people of good will." I use the words "*on earth, peace to people of the world*" so that I can be true to what I believe without changing the rhythm or sounding too much different than the rest of the congregation. Most of the time, no one notices, although one of the children at the Mass in Middleburgh this year did hear what I said.

The new insight I received this year is that there is truth in both sides of that phrase from the Gloria. While the gift of God's love and peace in Christ is totally free and unconditional, given before we deserve it and totally incapable of being earned, it is a gift that needs to be unwrapped and welcomed in order to accomplish in us and in the world what God intends.