

Homily based on the readings from December 22, 2024 (Micah 5.1-4a; Hebrews 10.5-10; Luke 1.39-45)

The Nicene Creed, which we profess every Sunday – which we will join together in reciting as soon as this homily is over – was written almost 1700 years ago, to provide a *roadmap* for what every faithful Christian is expected to *believe*. Every line in the Creed is there for a specific reason – responding to a particular error that the Church has been forced to address. Among all the *falsehoods* that are rebutted in the Creed, the most pernicious – and the most persistent – are those associated with a man known as *Arius of Alexandria*.

In addition to denying the entire concept of the Holy Trinity, Arius is *infamous* for making the following statement about the origin of Jesus Christ: *there was a time when the Son was not*. In other words – according to Arius – Christ is not eternal, he is not of the same substance as the Father, he is not a co-equal participant in the creation of the universe. From this perspective, Christ is simply a created being – just

like you, just like me. For the followers of Arius, Christ could potentially be considered *godlike*, but he could *never* be viewed as *God*.

As a quick aside, Saint Nicholas of Myra – the inspiration for the modern figure of Santa Claus – was actually present at the First Council of Nicaea, where the Nicene Creed was composed. According to a medieval legend, he was so frustrated with the lies that were being spread by Arius and his followers that he actually slapped Arius in the face. This story is *probably* just wishful thinking – Santa Claus slapping a heretic – but it still illustrates an important fact: Christmas would be utterly *meaningless* without a correct understanding of the true nature of Christ.

It is likely that most people living today have never heard of *Arius* – but his *influence* is just as pervasive as ever. I am sure we all know people in our community – even in our own family – who acknowledge Jesus as a wise teacher or a commendable role model, but who refuse to accept the fact that he is actually God himself. While we must always respond

to these individuals with kindness and respect, we have to be clear that the position they are espousing is *totally* untenable.

C. S. Lewis, a well-known Protestant author, described this situation with perfect clarity:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.

In other words, belief in Christ is an all-or-nothing proposition. There is no room for hedging our bets, no mushy middle ground.

Our task, as Christians, is to *proclaim* the true nature of Jesus Christ – God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. In this respect, today's Gospel provides us with an astonishing role model: a

*baby* in the womb. Even though the *conversation* recorded in the Gospel involves two adult women, the *substance* of the interaction takes place between a pair of unborn infants. John the Baptist – who at this point is still several months away from being born – is perhaps the first human being to recognize the physical presence of Jesus Christ. John’s awareness of Jesus is not the result of years of study – or even prayerful anticipation – but an *instinctive* response to the power and majesty of Christ’s divinity.

Even though most of the iconography of the Christmas season relates to the birth of a baby, we must never envision the infant Jesus as being *helpless* or *passive*. Even lying in the manger – even nestled in Mary’s womb – he is still the mighty king, “whose origin is from of old, from ancient times.” His strength is not derived from any earthly qualities – from his physical prowess or his persuasive rhetoric – but from his eternal *being* as a consubstantial person of the Holy Trinity. If we imagine Jesus Christ as being anything less than God himself, then we

have completely missed the whole point of Christmas – and, in fact, the whole point of Christianity itself.

Even though the birth of any child is a cause for celebration, the joy of *this* birth is absolutely and utterly unique. The boundaries between heaven and earth are broken; the human and the divine are irrevocably intermixed. There is no precedent for this event in the history of the *world*, nor will anything like it occur again. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ not only shows us who *God* is, but it shows us who *we* are – and what destiny awaits us. God loves us *so much* that he himself came into the world, that he *became* one of us, that he is *calling* each of us to join with him in the eternal happiness of Heaven.

Is it any wonder that John the Baptist leaped for joy? Let us pray that we all may share, not only in John's exuberance, but in his awe and wonder at the true presence of God in our midst – not just for a few days in late December, but every single day of our lives.