

Christmas Vigil Mass “Jesus and Our Family Tree”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Test time! Who was the son of Zerubbabel? Anyone? Anyone? I love genealogies, especially this one. Every one of us here has a family tree. Unless you were deposited here by aliens, you all have a mother and a father, and you all have two sets of grandparents. We all come from families. The miracle of Christmas is that the eternal and omnipotent God is born into our human family in the person of Jesus Christ. The eternal and omnipotent God now has a family tree. What good news! Just as we can learn a lot about ourselves, and our family, by looking at our family tree, we can learn a lot about Jesus by reading the Old Testament. And as we look at the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, and the Son of Abraham, we have a stunning observation from our Evangelist St. Matthew, “the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Christ, fourteen generations.”

What is the significance of the number 14, you may ask? The people of Matthew’s days were big into numerology. If you take the name David and calculate the numerical significance, the number you get is fourteen. Jesus, for Matthew, is the new Christos, the new King David, who has been given to us in the fullness of time.

The fourteen generations from Abraham up to David were a golden age. King David represented a unified Israel, and a time of peace and plenty. The fourteen generations from David down to the overthrow of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile represents the worst of times. As the psalmist lamented by the streams of Babylon, if I forget you Jerusalem let my right-hand wither! From the Babylonian exile up to the time of Christ represents the age of salvation and new hope, for a child has been born in the city of David. As Isaiah prophesied, “a child is born to us, a son is given us, upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David’s throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains, by judgment and justice, both now and forever.”

My friends, the name Jesus literally means “God saves”. The Messiah did not come however to liberate Israel from Babylonians or Romans. The Messiah came to liberate us from the tyranny of sin and death. When Jesus was born, did you notice in the genealogy that he became a descendent of David by adoption? In our rebirth at baptism, we became adopted children of God through Jesus Christ. As St. Paul argues, we who were baptized in Christ were also baptized in his death. Just as we have died with Christ, we will rise with him as Christ’s “heirs in hope of eternal life”.

My friends, when we look at Jesus’ genealogy, we can see times of prosperity and times of oppression. When we look at our own family tree and history, we can also see times when things were going very good and times when things were really going bad. If we look at our genealogy, we can see the best of times and the worst of times, we can see the saints and the sinners, and a lot of ups and downs. On Christmas morning, the good news is God has entered into our family history. God has become incarnate into our best of times and worst of

times. God has entered into our strengths and weaknesses. God has entered into our lives and even into our deaths. Because of Christmas morning, God has adopted us into everlasting life. On this holy night, all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

Consider that, when a relative has a birthday, we celebrate it. God has entered into our family tree in Jesus Christ, and therefore we are here tonight to celebrate Christmas. After all, the reason for the season is Jesus Christ. Tonight we celebrate his birthday.

On birthdays, we usually bring presents don't we? We all like to get presents on Christmas morning, but tonight I invite you to not forget the birthday boy! Please consider what gift shall we give to Jesus on his birthday? I invite us all tonight to bring to Jesus the gift of ourselves, the gift of our very souls, everything we are, were or will become. Let's give to Jesus tonight the gift of our lives, our weaknesses, our foibles, our strengths, and talents. Let's bring to the infant Jesus our memories, good and bad, our relationships, healthy or broken. Let's bring to Christ our good deeds and yes, even our sins. Let's give to Jesus our relationships with our relatives, those that are healthy and yes even those that are broken. My friends, let's place everything that we are at the feet of the baby Jesus.

In our culture, it is usually not customary for the birthday boy to give gifts to others on his birthday. The amazing thing about Jesus, however, is that on his birthday, he likes to give more presents than he receives. On Christmas, if we give to Jesus the gift of ourselves, Jesus will give us the gift of Himself. If we give to Jesus our hurts and hopes, Jesus gives us the gifts of His love and healing. If we give to Jesus our sins and mortality, Jesus will give us His passion and resurrection. How about that for a gift exchange! We give to Christ our strengths and weaknesses, our lives, and our deaths. Jesus gives us His love, understanding, healing and eternal life!

And so, my friends, in a world full of distractions, worries and fears we are invited to take time away from the busyness of a commercial holiday and make room for Jesus in the inn of our hearts. Before we can welcome the Lord into our hearts, however, we must clear the clutter and make room for Him. We can do this by taking time for prayer and spending quality time with God, family, and friends. We can do this by keeping in mind those who are struggling to make ends meet this winter. We can enhance our relationship with God this Christmas by simply sitting down and reading the Christmas story that is found in either Matthew or Luke. We can enhance our relationship with our family and friends by taking the time to pray for them, making the time for a phone call or visit, and discovering how better it is to give than to receive. My friends, the invitation this Christmas is to welcome the Lord's birth in the inn of our hearts and to be emissaries of Christ's light to the world around us.

You see, a remarkable gift has been given to us on Christmas. We have been given the gift of God's only Son, given to us in his life, given to us in his death, and given to us in his resurrection heralding the hope for our own. Indeed, Christ tonight will give us the gift of his body and blood, poured out for our salvation. Can there be any gift more precious than this?

The Gospel reading reminds us that we all come from families. The miracle of Christmas is that the eternal and omnipotent God was born into our human history in the person of Jesus Christ. The eternal and omnipotent God now has a family tree. As adopted children in baptism, we are all given the gift to be in Christ's genealogy, and therefore a welcome into the inner life of the Holy Trinity. This is what the Church would call a Christmas present. The challenge? Dare we open this gift? Do we dare? And if so, are we prepared for the consequences in our daily lives and interactions with those we like and those we find difficult? Are we prepared to look at our lives differently, our good memories and our painful memories? How ought we to see the world now that our names have been added to Jesus' family tree? Once this question is answered, we will have a blessed Christmas indeed!