

CHRISTMAS (Years A, B, C)

I. Introduction

During the Vietnam War, an American soldier, Sergeant Daniel Pitzer, was captured in battle by Communist forces known as the Viet Cong. He and other American prisoners endured brutal treatment; they spent every night, and much of the day, confined in tiny cages, and because their diet consisted of a handful of rice and whatever food they could scrounge in the surrounding jungle, they were malnourished and in poor health. Sergeant Pitzer tried to escape on several occasions, but was always quickly recaptured and severely punished. In his anguish he demanded of God, “Why are You doing this to me? Why am I being put through this kind of torture?” On Christmas Eve in 1964, Sergeant Pitzer was working outside the camp, gathering something to eat, when he heard an American helicopter, which suddenly appeared and shot up the camp. The sergeant didn’t dare run for the helicopter, for in his black, pajama-type uniform, he would likely be mistaken for an enemy soldier and shot by his countrymen before he could identify himself. Almost in tears, he cowered in the jungle until the camp guards found him.

That night, the Viet Cong guards gave the Americans a handful of rice and ordered them to gather their few possessions; they marched along the river for several hours in darkness to a new prison camp. Just before midnight on Christmas Eve, the procession rounded a bend in the river, and everyone—guards and prisoners alike—stopped in amazement. A magnificent evergreen tree, almost forty feet tall, was standing alone by the water; it twinkled merrily, as if lit up by lights—which in fact were thousands of fireflies hovering around it. Furthermore, above its top branches a star shining brightly in the night sky seemed to be resting atop the tree. Sergeant Pitzer was filled with an incredible sense of peace and well-being; he realized that God had chosen something recognizable to all Americans—a beautiful Christmas tree—as a way of letting him and the other prisoners know He was with them. From then on, the sergeant frequently prayed aloud to God in his little cage, and when the Communist guards asked who he was speaking to, he simply replied, “Someone [here with me] you will never know” (Charles W. Sasser, *God in the Foxhole*, pp. 30-31). Sergeant Pitzer—who was eventually released and returned to America—experienced the wonderful and amazing truth that, even in the worst of circumstances, as long as we trust in God, we are never alone.

II. Development

Christmas is not only the celebration of the birth of the infant Jesus; it’s also a glorious reminder that God our Father did not abandon or forget His people. We were trapped in sin, and had no hope of salvation. In His great mercy, however, God Himself chose to become one of us—a truly amazing testimony or proof of His love.

Mass at Midnight: As the prophet Isaiah says in the 1st Reading, “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” and in the Gospel the shepherds saw choirs of angels and witnessed the glory of the Lord shining around them.

Mass at Dawn: St. Paul tells us that God our Savior appeared not because of any righteous deeds on our part, but because of His mercy—and the shepherds watching their flocks outside Bethlehem were able to see the living sign of this mercy lying in a manger.

A world trapped in the darkness of sin suddenly experienced the light of divine truth and love—and a new chapter of this wondrous story is supposed to be unfolding right now, in our own lives.

III. Conclusion

Each of us is involved in spiritual warfare—our own fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil, in which we can easily feel alone, confused, and overwhelmed. Because of the ongoing effects of original sin, life can be painful and difficult; it can involve alienation, disappointments, and unappealing choices, and at times we may even feel oppressed or spiritually imprisoned, while calling out to God, as did Sergeant Pitzer, “Why am I being put through this kind of torture?” Our Lord always hears and answers such a plea from the heart. Jesus came to set us free, and He established the Church to help us on our journey to Heaven by sharing the light of His truth and the peace and love available through His sacraments. It is necessary, however, that we live as true followers of Christ, being active members of His Church, taking seriously our religious duties by loving and serving our neighbor while placing God at the center of our lives. Without such an effort on our part, Christmas will never achieve its deepest meaning and purpose, and we will never truly be free.

Today we celebrate the good news that we do not have to face the trials and burdens of life alone. As a human being Himself, Jesus understands what we’re facing, and as the eternal Son of God, He has the power to give meaning to our suffering while showing us the way to everlasting life and happiness. The Christmas trees we see—whether here in church, outside, or in our own homes, can serve as reminders that Jesus is always with us, calling us to a new and deeper life. God’s gracious and merciful love is all around us; all He asks is that we open our hearts to Him and give Him our trust.