



❧ A CHRISTMAS HOMILY *by* FR. WILLIAM J. BAUSCH ❧

Erik and the Old Man

The PASSION *of* CHRISTMAS

Somewhere in the north of Holland, there is a church where all those who entered used to bow down in the direction of a whitewashed part of the church wall before settling into the pews. Nobody knew why. They had been doing this from generation to generation, perhaps for a hundred or more years. Then one day the parish council decided to clean the walls. While doing this, they discovered some traces of a painting under

the whitewash. Very carefully they began to peel off the chalk, and they uncovered a centuries-old painting of Jesus on the cross.

Nobody remembered this picture. There was no record of it to be found. The painting had been lost from human memory. It must have been painted over centuries before, but the sign of respect had remained. That's a good metaphor for Christmas. People make vague gestures toward the manger, but they have whitewashed it with cuteness and sentimentality and basically have forgotten what this feast is about, have obliterated the picture behind it. *Even good Christians.* A recent poll found that the largest percentage of Christians interviewed said that Christmas was all about families getting together. Well, that's nice, but what about Christmas being about Jesus?

But even those who did mention Christmas as the birth of Christ, the founder of Christianity, tended to focus on the wrong things. They tended to focus on the emotion of it all: the appealing Baby in the manger, the crèche, the tableau of soft sweetness. Not one in a thousand, not one in a million, not, I suspect, most of us here, would zone in on the one word—a rather shocking word—that the Bible, the Church, and Tradition tell us is really at the heart of Christmas. We too have forgotten. And that word is not sweetness, softness, gentleness.

No, it is **passion!** Does that surprise you? Yet it's written all over the Christmas scene. The truth of the matter is that we *don't* have in Christmas sweetness and darlingness, and softness. We have here, this Christmas night, plain, unadulterated, hard, raw pas-

sion. What I'm challenging your memory to recall is that, yes, we have a cuddly baby, but behind that facade, behind that tenderness, is a fierce and a passionate God, and *that* always doesn't come across in the sentimental pageantry of the manger.

Take a second look. The Christmas message and the Christmas celebration centers around God's great love for us, the commitment not to leave us abandoned, not to leave us in the darkness of political, social, or personal tyrannies. The message of Christmas is summed up in that communication the angel made to Mary at the Annunciation, "You shall call his name Jesus and he shall be known as Emmanuel, which translates "God with us." Yes, "God with us," or, in the reverential phrase of John's gospel, *Et Verbum Caro factum Est et Habitavit in Nobis*": And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

Why? Why? Why does God want to dwell among us? **Because God wants to.** Because, simply put, the object of *all* love is union: to be with the beloved. So, whatever it is, God has a thing for us—a Passion.

The real Christmas memory, then, is not that of a passive seductive Baby Jesus but rather of an active *desiring God*. Christmas is about a driving desire on God's part "to dwell among us," to be a part of the human condition. God loves us that much. God yearns for us that much. And *that's* passion.

Maybe I can get my point across through a story, a story that mentions a baby. It's told by a woman, the baby's mother. Listen.

It was Sunday, Christmas. Our family had spent a holiday in San Francisco with my

husband's parents, but in order for us to be back at work on Monday, we found ourselves driving the 400 miles back home to Los Angeles on Christmas Day. We stopped for lunch in King City. The restaurant was nearly empty. We were the only family and ours were the only children.

I heard Erik, my one-year-old, squeal with glee. "Hithere," the two words he always thought were one. "Hithere," and he pounded his fat baby hands—whack, whack, whack—on the metal high chair. His face was alive with excitement, his eyes were wide, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled, and then I saw the source of his merriment. And my eyes could not take it in all at once.

A tattered rag of a coat, obviously bought by someone else eons ago, dirty, greasy, and worn; baggy pants; spindly body; toes that poked out of would-be shoes; a shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over; and a face like none other—gums as bare as Erik's. "Hi there, baby. Hi there, big boy, I see ya, Buster."

My husband and I exchanged a look that was a cross between "What do we do?" and "Poor devil." Our meal came and the banging and the noise continued. Now the old bum was shouting across the room, "Do you know patty cake? Atta boy. Do you know peekaboo? Hey, look! He knows peekaboo!"

Erik continued to laugh and answer, "Hithere." Every call was echoed. Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was a drunk and a disturbance. I was embarrassed. My husband, Dennis, was humiliated. Even our six-year-old said, "Why is that old man talking so loud?"

Dennis went to pay the check, imploring me to get Erik and meet him in the parking lot. "Lord, just let me get out of here before he speaks to me or Erik," and I bolted for the door. It soon was obvious that both the Lord and Erik had other plans.

As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back, walking to sidestep him and any air that he might be breathing. As I did so, Erik, all the while with his eyes riveted to his best friend, leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms to a baby's pick-me-up position. In a split second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight, I came eye-to-eye with the old man.

Erik was lunging for him, arms spread wide. The bum's eyes both asked and implored, "Would you let me hold your baby?" There was no need for me to answer since Erik propelled himself from my arms to the man. Suddenly a very old man and a very young baby consummated their love relationship. Erik laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed and I saw tears hover beneath the lashes. His aged hands, full of grime and pain and hard labor, gently, so gently, cradled my baby's bottom and stroked his back. I stood awestruck.

The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm, commanding voice, "You take care of this baby." And somehow I managed "I will" from a throat that contained a stone. He pried Erik from his chest, unwillingly, longingly, as though he was in pain.

I held my arms open to receive my baby, and again the gentleman addressed me:

“God bless you, Ma’am. You’ve given me my Christmas gift.” I said nothing more than a muttered “Thanks.” With Erik in my arms, I ran for the car. Dennis wondered why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly. And why I was saying, “My God, forgive me. Forgive me.”

I would like to suggest that the real meaning of Christmas is in this story. Simply put, Erik is God. Simply put, the bum is us. Erik is God’s yearning and passion for us tattered bums with our tattered lives, our tattered hurts, our tattered relationships, and our tattered sins. Erik is two arms determined to hug us. Erik is a fierce little baby who makes no distinctions but would embrace the least likely—you and me.

And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

And *that’s* what Christmas is about. It’s an enormously unrelenting kind of a feast.

It is not sentimentality.
It is not soft.
It is not Sweet Baby Jesus.
Christmas is volatile Erik.
No, when you look at the manger, no cooing baby here.
Only love satisfied.
This is why, when you come right down to it, we celebrate Christmas. If God is not with us and if God has not embraced our tattered lives, woe is us.
There is no hope.
And there is no light, only darkness and despair.
And we are here tonight out of fruitless socializing, pressured routine, or empty sentimentality.
But if we are here because of love and we are here like the ragtag shepherds that we are, to humbly kneel and rejoice, then we have caught Christmas’s meaning: Emmanuel, the passionate God, has had his way and has hugged us fiercely.



A Merry, Passionate Christmas to You All!

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