

**Christmas Vigil Mass
December 24, 2009
4 pm Liturgy**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

You may have come here this evening expecting to hear again a quaint story, one which most of us know by heart, one which every school-child can tell. You might enjoy it if I just recited Linus' dramatic speech from "A Charlie Brown Christmas." "Once upon a time, there were Shepherds keeping watch over their sheep by night...." That's St. Luke's version, the one we'll hear at midnight. And we just heard St. Matthew's version. Equally quaint, if quite different. These are the stories of a children's Christmas. And they are beautiful and touching.

But there are stranger things happening than any children's story can tell. This is the unfolding of God's plan, formed before the creation of the world. And Matthew offers the strange punch-line. And the name they shall call him is Emmanuel: God is with us! God is before us, and around us, and in us. God is now us! You and me. And it seems it cannot really be, but it is. This is the stuff of an adult Christmas story.

I always think at Christmas of G. K. Chesterton's enigmatic line: Christmas is about "Things that cannot be, and (yet) that are." Into time and human history comes a reality that is timeless, eternal. The timeless

event only intersects with our regular time in this one flash of light, the light of this night. For adults, this night ought to be startling, not just comforting.

As Fordham's Jesuit theologian Les Orsy puts it: "Our small planet has become sacred ground, more than Mount Sinai ever was. Wherever we walk, whatever we see, the things we touch belong to a universe that the holy, strong and Immortal One not only embraced but of which he became part. Now he belongs to us. He was born from a woman; he is our kind; he carries the blessings and the burdens of our flesh and blood; he eats the bread we bake and drinks the wine we prepare. As long as the universe breathes, he is present in it."

An ancient hymn says it well: In the stillness of the night, when all the world was at peace, when all was still, the eternal Word leapt down from heaven. The One whom the whole world cannot contain enclosed himself in a woman's womb in a timeless moment of human history. Things that cannot be, yet are!

And all we can really do is gawk in silent gratitude. That is the real adult message of Christmas—every year.

This is a night of stillness. Listen for a moment. Let the silence speak. We celebrate the things that cannot possibly be....And yet they are. We

celebrate God's unfathomable love. Be still. And have a Merry Christmas.