***It’s Beginning to look a lot like…***

I can remember when I saw my first artificial Christmas tree. It came into my boyhood home when I was about ten years old. It looked like someone had raided the Aluminum Foil Company, cutting strips of foil, and then wrapping the strips around pieces of metal coat hangers. Not to stand by itself, the next addition was a turning lighted wheel with various primary colors so that one could stand back and see something that was shaped like a tree, but obviously was not a tree, with regulated, ever-changing colors. There it stood in all its glory — an Aluminum Christmas Tree. Apart from the fact that my mind was having difficulty with that concept, there was the added reality that when I went to bed on Christmas Eve, after having gone to Midnight Mass, that when I awakened Santa Claus would have put up everything decoration wise that would have existed in the early 1950’s.

 Obviously, most people had newly cut Christmas trees whose needles could only handle the Twelve Days of Christmas, so that there was never any question about the beginning and ending of Christmas: Christmas through Epiphany. Of course, before we jumped into the future, our trees went to the Epiphany bonfire where we could moan with others about Christmas being over. In Western Pennsylvania, most people would add a day so that they could celebrate “Russian Christmas.” We didn’t necessarily understand why our Russian Orthodox friends did that, but we liked it. Our Jewish friends would regale us with stories about Hanukkah Harry who put up their Hanukkah bushes and left them toys.

 I will not state the obvious — it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas partly depends on which Christmas Movie Channel you watch or if you take out the turkey carcass Thursday night and bring in the tree! I will also not criticize those who start early, in anticipation of the birth of Christ. I have spent a great deal of my life either hearing “The Last Gospel” or saying it, at the end of Mass before the Procession out. A daily reminder of the Incarnation by reciting the prologue of the Gospel of St. John is a good thing! However, just as so many “big box churches” seem to jump from "Palmless" Sunday to Easter, with egg dying on Good Friday, and Egg Hunts on Holy Saturday, so it is that many Christians seem to ignore the Annunciation (The Archangel Gabriel and the Blessed Mother), the Visitation (The Blessed Mother visiting St. Elizabeth, the mother of St. John the Baptist) and the rigorous trip on a donkey from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

 The question, however, is given that we can now decorate our houses with unheard of decorations - how can anyone be expected to make that happen Christmas Eve before the children awaken at dawn on Christmas morning. To look at it in another way, in the usual birth pattern of the day, now that most babies are born in the hospital, does Dad stay up and furnish and decorate the bedroom designated as the nursery the night before the baby and mother come home? Or, does Mom really feel like furnishing and decorating during her last month of pregnancy? The complexity of life dictates that we make preparations well in advance. However, I do not know any mothers who have baby parties before the day the child is born, nor do I know of any mothers who enjoy people taking a peek of the baby on the day of birth, and then leaving rapidly before the relatives who are coming from the East even make it to the celebration of the birth of the child.

 In the Church, we have Advent for a reason, and in spite of the fact that fifty years ago there were virtually no churches that had Advent Wreaths in their Naves, Chancels, or Sanctuaries - it is an excellent way to anticipate and do the count down, provided that we do not let people think that the “Twelve Days of Christmas” is a count down from St. Lucy’s Day, December 13!

 We need to make spiritual preparations that are somewhat a akin to house cleaning and preparing the nursery for the arrival of the child. It is not the lengthy preparation period leading up to a one-day event that is of concern. It is that (even some Christians) think that Christmas is an event rather than a Season. Christmas has become a bit like a fast-food restaurant - “eat and run.” Most people who go to fast food restaurants do not spend days there savoring their chicken strips and French fries. BUT we Christians have built into our calendars the fact that our Feast Days begin the Season, whether it be an Octave (eight days) or a Season such as Christmas (twelve days.)

 The real question, therefore, is not “why do you start so early” but rather “why do you end so soon.” January 1 (Holy Name of Jesus/Circumcision) is not “take the tree to the curb day.” It is one of the Holy Days that allows Christians to say “Happy Holidays” from Christmas Day, St. Stephen’s Day, Holy Innocents Day - all the way to Epiphany when the Wise Men arrive. I wonder what it would be like if we started hanging signs a few days after Christmas saying “It’s over - you’re too late” so that we could have some sort of greeting for the Magi when they “arrive!”

 Therefore, “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas” is an appropriate song for most of the Twelve Days. If people continue to decorate on Boxing Day/St. Stephen’s Day (12/26) it’s not inappropriate at all. One of the things I have enjoyed so much in my fifteen trips to the Holy Land is celebrating “Christmas” (The Feast of the Nativity) in Bethlehem on three different days. With various Calendars in use, do we really think that people in ancient and historic places operate on the basis what an American culture offers as THE way to celebrate?

 Maybe we need to take a deep breath and admit that where we live, the way in which we celebrate Christmas has changed dramatically from the days it was abolished by some New Englanders, to the various decades since then. Well, it appears that green trees are “back in” and for extra money we can even pretend that they are real, but what needs **to be “real” is our Faith**. Why did people who never go to church - not even Christmas - still call it “Christ Mass.” Where do they think the word comes from? And why do modern Christmas movies substitute holiday events on Christmas Eve without any reference to people going to their church. If we have wanted the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ to be celebrated, have we unwittingly bought into a culture for whom Jesus is simply an historical figure - (maybe He existed)- and Christmas is simply a Winter event?

 When people say “I am not celebrating Christmas this year” do they seriously think that they can control the reality of God coming into this world as a defenseless baby. Maybe that would be a good clue for us today. “What have you done for Baby Jesus?” And “What have you gotten Him for His Birthday?” In the end He did all of this for us. What can we do so that in another generation, Christmas will simply be like another “day off” unrelated to why it ever was, not unlike Memorial Day and Veterans Day when we fire up the charcoal grill without ever remembering the price that was paid so that we could be free.

**Remember, Jesus paid a price so that we could be free. The least we can do is celebrate the Birthday of our Savior.**