

## HOMILY FOR 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT

His name was Shah-Jahan. He was emperor of what we now call India. And he was in grief. His wife had died and he was devastated by his loss. He decided to honor her in a most singular way. He would construct an incredible temple, the likes of which the world had never seen. The temple would serve as her tomb and be a dramatic symbol of his love for her.

Her coffin was placed in the center of a large parcel of land and construction began around it. No expense would be spared. But as the weeks turned into months, the Shah's grief was eclipsed by his passion for the building project.

He no longer missed her.

He hardly thought of her at all anymore.

He no longer mourned her absence.

He was now totally consumed with the details of the building project.

It was all he thought about.

Then one day while hurriedly walking from one side of the construction site to the other, he accidentally bumped his leg against a

wooden box. The Shah was irritated. Impatiently, he brushed the dust off his leg and ordered the workers to throw the box out immediately. What was that box doing there anyway? “Get it out,” he cried.

I’m sure that by now you have guessed that the box held the remains of his beloved wife. It was with great sadness that Emperor Shah-Jahan discovered his error. His magnificent temple is what we know as the Taj Mahal.

What followed in my original sermon was a reflection on not letting the details of Christmas get in the way of our celebrating Christmas. But then I spent some time in New York City and was saddened by what I saw. I realized that the story of the Taj Mahal had more to offer than I had first realized.

We live in a society, a culture, that has become increasingly ashamed of faith, embarrassed by faith and determine to cut the chord between faith and society. Even worse, the culture wants to suppress the influence of faith in our lives. Most especially is this prejudice aimed at Christianity and sometimes more pointedly at Catholicism.

Christmas trees have become holiday trees. Merry Christmas is replaced by “Happy Holidays” ... the new standard greeting. Christmas cards that reflect our faith in the birth of Jesus Christ have been replaced by cards that creativity keep everyone up with the growth progress of our

children. And of course, Happy Holidays becomes the essential greeting found in these cards.

I was quite stunned when I was in New York and found the window decorations at Saks 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue made famous by their portrayals of Christmas and its meaning, were now replaced by abstract toys that served as pedestals for half naked female mannequins. It all got summarized for me as I left St. Patrick's Cathedral and passed a group of people who were asking each other: "Is this place a church or something?" Could someone build a temple and forget why? Could someone sculpt a tribute and forget the hero?

Shah-Jahan forgot why he was building his beloved Taj Mahal. He got so absorbed by the beauty of the trappings, that he forgot the heart of what he was doing. We've taken this one step further. We've created a construct of Holiday Cheer that not only wants us to forget what is the obvious center of the celebration. Our culture wants us to forget that there is even a reason for this Season.

Christmas is a week away. The gospel reminds that the center of our celebration is the profound truth that God's love for us is so powerful that He whom the heavens could not contain took flesh in the womb of Mary. Jesus Christ who was the incarnation of God's love now wants to enter the flesh of our own hearts.

This is the miracle and the blessing of Christmas. It is not just a holiday. It is not just the “happiest season of the year.” Christmas celebrates the profound truth that the coming of Jesus Christ changes everything. And we as Christians and as Catholics should never be ashamed or embarrassed that God loved us so much that we were given the gift of Jesus Christ, our savior and our redeemer.

Let’s not forget this as we take this last week to prepare for our Celebration of Christmas.