**St. Mary of the Angels Christmas Day (Dawn Mass) 12/25/20**

**Isaiah 62: 11-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20**

**My Brothers and Sisters,**

**Bells!**

**The sound of bells!**

**The joyful music of bells!**

**For me, bells have long been associated with Christmas.**

**As a young teenager, my brother and I belonged to a group of bellringers at the Children’s Museum, located, at that time, in nearby Jamaica Plain. As Christmas approached, the team of four of us would be invited to many churches, --mostly Protestant,-- to play Christmas carols on English handbells. In all humility, I want to say that we were good – very good! We even got to play with the renowned Beacon Hill bellringers, and once, back in 1948, played our handbells on television, in television’s infant days.**

**Yes, for me, Christmas and bells go together.**

**Do they go together for you too?**

**For many people, whether secular or religious, they do.**

**We are all familiar with various songs of bells:**

**like Wordsworth’s**

**“I heard the bells on Christmas day**

**Their old familiar carols play.”**

**Or, Edgar Allen Poe’s**

**“Hear the sledges with the bells –**

**Silver bells.”**

**Or James Pierpont’s bouncy**

**“Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells. Jingle all the way.”**

**Or, the melodic “Carol of the Bells”:**

**“Hark how the bells,**

**Sweet silver bells**

**All seem to say**

**Christmas is here**

**Bringing good cheer.”**

**And, some of you of my age will remember Bing Crosby singing,**

**“Silver bells, silver bells,**

**It’s Christmas time in the city…”**

**Those songs of bells may be more secular and more nostalgic now, but**

**bells do have a very ancient religious history.**

**In ancient China and Tibet, bells were rung to scare away evil spirits, but also to call people to prayer, and were even prayer itself, symbolizing peace and patience.**

**But, with Christianity blossoming in the fourth century, the Church saw the ringing of bells, not only as a call to worship, but also as a way of reminding people continuously of their God.**

**In monasteries, bells marked the hours of the day.**

**In the city and countryside, churches rang bells three times a day – morning, noon, and night -- for the angelus, the prayer that reminds us that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”**

**Even in modern times, at Mass, altar servers ring bells at the time of consecration to call our attention to Christ’s real presence now in the offered bread and wine.**

**On a grander scale, bells break the long silence of Advent and the longer silence of Lent.**

**During Advent and Lent, we have no bells and we have no sung gloria in the Mass. We skip over the Gloria, almost forgetting it had been there. But its absence is to remind us that we are in a time of waiting and longing and preparing for the greatest mysteries of all: the mystery of God’s Incarnation at Christmas and the greater mystery of our Redemption at Easter.**

**In former days, when the first Christmas Mass was at midnight, (as last night at St. Thomas Aquinas Church) it was customary to ring bells at the stroke of twelve, for it was believed that it was at midnight that Jesus was born.**

**At the Easter Vigil, it is when the Gloria is finally sung again, that we break forth with a continuous ringing of bells. In both instances, -- at Christmas and at Easter – bells announce that the great moment has arrived.**

**At Christmas, we celebrate heaven and earth coming together in the birth of this baby, Jesus, -- God and humanity are joined as one.**

**At the Easter Vigil, the cantor sings in the Exultet, “O truly blessed night when things of heaven are wed to those of earth and divine to the human.”**

**So, at Easter, our wedding, our marriage, with God is complete. What began as the joyful summoning bells of Christmas now become the wedding bells of Easter. God in Jesus through his Spirit has formed a new and deeper union.**

**The two go together: both the bells of Christmas and the bells of Easter as we celebrate the unfathomable mysteries of God’s incarnation, Jesus’ resurrection, our redemption, and our union with God – all so much beyond our comprehension – beyond all that we humans could ever dream or hope for!**

**My Brothers and Sisters,**

**This Christmas, we hear no bells just as at the last Easter vigil we heard no bells, and may not hear any bells this next Easter either.**

**But, perhaps, silence is a more fitting way to welcome our God in Jesus this year.**

**We have been humbled by the weight of our sins:**

**We have abused God’s earth and we have hurt one another – terribly so!**

**We need to receive Jesus anew in our hearts, but more humbly and quietly.**

**So, this year, without loud sounding bells, we can still let bells ring silently in our hearts:**

**Joyful bells of gratitude for medical workers, a vaccine and a new government.**

**Triumphant bells for the courage of so many in the face of pandemic and prejudice.**

**Sad bells, too, commemorating the loss of loved ones.**

**But tinkling bells, too, for the sharing of laughter and humor during such a difficult time.**

**And hopeful bells as we renew, once again, our faith in the humble plan of God who, over two thousand years ago, did unite heaven and earth, did join together the Divine and the human. No matter what others believe or do not believe, we Christians do believe in that humble love of God who came down to us, one day, to be with us, to grow up with us, and to show us the way. In God alone is our peace.**

**May we go forth, therefore, appreciating more deeply, God’s steadfast love-dream for us, begun long ago. And may we join our quiet bells to the angels’ hymn: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”**

**May his favor, once again, rest on our weary world!**

**Kenneth J. Hughes, SJ**

**Boston, Mass. 12/25/20**