

A CHRISTMAS TALE: JOSE'S SANDALS

December 31, 2006, 1 Christmas, Year C

The Rev'd. Dr. Patrick R. Close

It's very easy today to remember that we are still in Christmas Tide. Christmas is a season, not just a day. You wouldn't know it by our surrounding culture. We are preparing today for our New Year's Eve celebrations, or for a football game this afternoon (the Eagles versus the Falcons), or the Christmas sales in the store. Already, Christmas is fading from our memory and our experience, as we look forward to others things.

I would like to ask us to remember Christmas and enjoy the season. We are still in the midst of the celebration of our Savior's birth. The Incarnation is God's coming to earth to be with us as one of us in the person of Jesus. I wish we wouldn't rush things and enjoy the spirit and meaning of this season. For me, I always take this time to send out my Christmas cards. It allows me the time I need to write personal notes to family and friends. I don't set myself some deadline before December 25th ... besides; I never seem to find the time to do so anyway!

What I would like to do today is share another Christmas story with you. It's a reminder of the season and points us towards some things to think and pray about in the coming new year. So sit back, listen and enjoy.

A long time ago, there lived in a village in the south of Brazil a little seven-year-old boy named Jose. He had lost his parents when he was very young and had been adopted by a miserly aunt. Even though she had lots of money, she spent almost nothing on her nephew. Jose never knew the meaning of love. He assumed that this was simply the way life was and so it didn't bother him.

Jose and his aunt lived in an extremely affluent neighborhood, much like Haddonfield. The aunt persuaded the principal of the local school to take her nephew for a tenth of the normal tuition fee. She threatened to complain to the mayor if he declined her offer. The principal had no option but to agree. However, he instructed the teachers to take every opportunity to humiliate Jose. His hope was that the boy would misbehave and give them an excuse to expel him. But Jose never knew the meaning of love. He assumed that this was simply the way life was and so it didn't bother him.

Christmas Eve arrived. The village priest was out of town, and all the pupils had to go to a distant village Church for the Christmas Mass. The boys and girls walked along, chatting about what they would find the next day beside their shoes. These children didn't put up stockings. They believed that Father Christmas came late at night and put the goodies in their shoes! They thought about expensive clothes (like Calvin Kline jeans or \$200 Nike shoes); expensive toys (like "Tickle me Elmo" and Play Station 3); candy and chocolates, skateboards, bicycles and dolls. It was a special day and all the children were well-dressed ... except for Jose. He was wearing his usual ragged clothes and the same battered sandals that were too small for him. Jose's aunt had bought him one pair of sandals when he was five. She said that he would only get a new pair when he was 10.

Some of the children asked him why he was so poor. Most of them said that they would be ashamed to have a friend who wore such clothes and shoes. But Jose had never known love, so their questions and comments didn't bother him at all.

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When they went into the Church, the bright lights of the candles and the beautiful music coming from the organ awed Jose. In the congregation, he saw people in their Christmas best. He saw families gathered together and parents embracing their children. Jose felt he was the most wretched of creatures. After Communion, he didn't walk back home with the others. Jose sat down on the steps of the Church and began to cry. He had never known love, but at that moment he felt and understood what it was to be alone ... helpless ... and abandoned by all.

While he was crying, Jose noticed another small boy beside him. He was barefoot and apparently as poor as he was. He had never seen the boy before. Jose thought to himself, "His feet must be really sore. I'll give him one of my sandals. That will at least relieve half of his pain." Although Jose had never known love, he knew about suffering and didn't want others to experience it too.

Jose gave one of his sandals to the boy and returned home with the other one. He wore the sandal first on one foot and then on the other. It was this way that he didn't bruise the soles of his feet too badly on the stones and gravel along the way. When he reached home, his aunt noticed that he was wearing only one sandal. She told Jose that if he didn't find the other sandal the next day, he would be severely punished.

He went to bed feeling very afraid. He knew his aunt's punishments could be very bad. He lay all night trembling with fear. He was barely able to sleep at all. Just as Jose was about to drowse off, he heard voices in the front room. He aunt burst into his room, demanding to know what was going on. Jose was still groggy from the lack of sleep when he joined the visitors. In the middle of the room, he saw both his sandals ... surrounded by toys and candy and clothes and more! The neighbors were shouting and screaming. They said their children had been robbed, because they woke up and found nothing beside their shoes at all!

Just then, the priest from the Church in the neighboring village arrived out of breath. He said that a statue of the Baby Jesus had appeared on the steps of the Church. It was clothed entirely in gold ... but was wearing only one sandal! Silence fell on everyone in the room. They looked at Jose as he told them of what had happened to him at the Church the day before. Everyone praised God and the miracle. They embraced Jose. He aunt wept and begged him for forgiveness. That Christmas day, Jose's heart was filled with the meaning of love.

We are invited this day to remember what Christmas is all about. Jesus came to the poor and suffering with the message of love and hope. It is our message and the world's. There are too many children like Jose who do not know love, and it's up to us to bring the reality of God's love to them. As we begin a new year, let's look for the ways that we can make this Christmas message a reality for others! May we all know the meaning of love. Amen!

("A Christmas Tale: Jose's Sandals", by Paul Coelho, 1903, Harper-Collins, taken from Beliefnet.com).