

In both our first reading from Isaiah and in our Gospel we hear of this title “Emmanuel.” It means “God with us” in Hebrew and describes Jesus – who He is and why He came among us. We rightly love the beauty of Christmas and its traditions. But the reason for Jesus coming among us, as one of us – with us, should remind us that the beauty of the incarnation is stark and challenging. Today in my homily I want to illustrate what that title “God with us” looks and feels like to help us understand who Jesus is – and the theology of Christmas -- through the life of a modern saint.

Many of you may have heard of St. Damien de Veuster. He was born in Belgium in 1840 and became a priest in a missionary order. He prayed for years that God would allow him to go on mission. One of Damien’s older brothers was also a priest in the same congregation, and this brother was assigned to go to Hawaii as a missionary, but he became sick. Damien begged to go in his place, and at last was given permission.

When Damien arrived in Hawaii in 1864 the Islands were undergoing a health crisis. Because of foreign merchants and sailors, new diseases had infected many of the native people of Hawaii. One of these diseases was leprosy. To protect the kingdom the King rounded up the lepers and quarantined them on the island of Molokai. The Lepers were abandoned and left to die. They felt all hope was lost and, in their despair, many turned to drunkenness and other vices. Life wasn't worth living, they were all going to die soon -- so why not?

The bishop of Hawaii knew he should help the lepers, but he also knew that ordering a priest to go to Molokai would put him in mortal danger of catching the disease. So, he asked for volunteers and Fr. Damien volunteered to go. He arrived on the island on May 10, 1865. The bishop went with him and introduced the priest to the lepers as, "one who loves you so much that he does not hesitate to become one of you, to live and die with you."

Damien's superiors had given him strict advice: "Do not touch them. Do not allow them to touch you. Do not eat with them." But Damien faced down his very real fears of contagion and entered into life with them. He touched them. He embraced them. He dined with them. He put his thumb on their heads when anointing them. He placed the Eucharist on their tongues. All these actions spoke loudly to the rejected lepers longing for human touch and showed that Damien did indeed love them.

Truly Damien became one of them, visiting the sick, bandaging their wounds, cleaning their homes, sharing their lives. He taught the lepers how to farm, to make musical instruments and to sing. In all these actions Damien gave the people hope and dignity and restored their sense of self-worth. Then, one Sunday, after many years among them, Fr. Damien began his homily by saying, "We Lepers." With that, they knew. Fr. Damien had himself contracted the dreadful disease.

We are getting close to Christmas, and the Church gives us these scriptures to help us prepare for it. This year when we meditate on the Christmas story let us remember this title of Jesus – Emmanuel. A Savior has come among us as one of us – as Damien came among the lepers of Molokai. We tend to romanticize Bethlehem, but we can understand Jesus’ better if we think of earth as His own Molokai.

If we are to receive Jesus as our own Savior, we must acknowledge our need for Him, as sinners in need of salvation from eternal death. We are lepers who are sick with sin and will die. Jesus came among us to give us hope amid our sickness and despair. Think here of Fr. Damien, sent to give the lepers hope and to remind them of their dignity and God’s love for them. Remember how the bishop introduced Fr. Damien to the lepers – “as one who loves you and does not hesitate to become one of you.”

Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. God has become one of us. Damien was not afraid to touch the lepers, to dine with them: just like

Jesus. Right here at Mass Jesus dines with us lepers. I've read that many Catholics don't believe that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist. They're selling Jesus' love short. The same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem comes to us right here in the Eucharist. When we receive Holy Communion worthily, we are accepting Jesus into our lives. That's how close Jesus wants to be to us – He wants to touch us. He wants us lepers to touch Him. He is still with us here and now.

On April 15, 1889, on the island of Molokai, Damian died a gruesome death from leprosy. He was 49 years old. He was canonized in 2009. St. Damien of Molokai had truly become one with the lepers, even to sharing their sickness and death. This seems incredibly heroic to us. But in doing this He was just imitating the One he served so well, Jesus, the sinless one, who took our sin upon Himself. We celebrate on Christmas because this Savior loves us so much, He came among us, suffered and died a gruesome death that we might live forever.