



The Holy See

MIDNIGHT MASS

SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Vatican Basilica

Saturday, 24 December 2005

"The Lord said to me: You are my son; this day I have begotten you". With these words of the second Psalm, the Church begins the Vigil Mass of Christmas, at which we celebrate the Birth of Jesus Christ our Redeemer in a stable in Bethlehem. This Psalm was once a part of the coronation rite of the kings of Judah. The People of Israel, in virtue of its election, considered itself in a special way a son of God, adopted by God. Just as the king was the personification of the people, his enthronement was experienced as a solemn act of adoption by God, whereby the King was in some way taken up into the very mystery of God. At Bethlehem night, these words, which were really more an expression of hope than a present reality, took on new and unexpected meaning. The Child lying in the manger is truly God's Son. God is not eternal solitude but rather a circle of love and mutual self-giving. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But there is more: in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God himself, God from God, became man. To him the Father says: "You are my son". God's everlasting "today" has come down into the fleeting today of the world and lifted our momentary today into God's eternal today. God is so great that he can become small. God is so powerful that he can make himself vulnerable and come to us as a defenceless child, so that we can love him. God is so good that he can give up his divine splendour and come down to a stable, so that we might find him, so that his goodness might touch us, give itself to us and continue to work through us. This is Christmas: "You are my son, this day I have begotten you". God has become one of us, so that we can be with him and become like him. As a sign, he chose the Child lying in the manger: this is how God is. This is how we come to know him. And on every child shines something of the splendour of that "today", of that closeness of God which we ought to love and to which we must yield – it shines on every child, even on those still unborn.

Let us listen to a second phrase from the liturgy of this holy Night, one taken from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: "Upon

the people who walked in darkness a great light has shone" (*Is* 9:1). The word "light" pervades the entire liturgy of tonight's Mass. It is found again in the passage drawn from Saint Paul's letter to Titus: "The grace of God has appeared" (2:11). The expression "has appeared", in the original Greek says the same thing that was expressed in Hebrew by the words "a light has shone": this "apparition" – this "epiphany" – is the breaking of God's light upon a world full of darkness and unsolved problems. The Gospel then relates that the glory of the Lord appeared to the shepherds and "shone around them" (*Lk* 2:9). Wherever God's glory appears, light spreads throughout the world. Saint John tells us that "God is light and in him is no darkness" (*1 Jn* 1:5). The light is a source of life.

But first, light means knowledge; it means truth, as contrasted with the darkness of falsehood and ignorance. Light gives us life, it shows us the way. But light, as a source of heat, also means love. Where there is love, light shines forth in the world; where there is hatred, the world remains in darkness. In the stable of Bethlehem there appeared the great light which the world awaits. In that Child lying in the stable, God has shown his glory – the glory of love, which gives itself away, stripping itself of all grandeur in order to guide us along the way of love. The light of Bethlehem has never been extinguished. In every age it has touched men and women, "it has shone around them". Wherever people put their faith in that Child, charity also sprang up – charity towards others, loving concern for the weak and the suffering, the grace of forgiveness. From Bethlehem a stream of light, love and truth spreads through the centuries. If we look to the Saints – from Paul and Augustine to Francis and Dominic, from Francis Xavier and Teresa of Avila to Mother Teresa of Calcutta – we see this flood of goodness, this path of light kindled ever anew by the mystery of Bethlehem, by that God who became a Child. In that Child, God countered the violence of this world with his own goodness. He calls us to follow that Child.

Along with the Christmas tree, our Austrian friends have also brought us a small flame lit in Bethlehem, as if to say that the true mystery of Christmas is the inner brightness radiating from this Child. May that inner brightness spread to us, and kindle in our hearts the flame of God's goodness; may all of us, by our love, bring light to the world! Let us keep this light-giving flame, lit in faith, from being extinguished by the cold winds of our time! Let us guard it faithfully and give it to others! On this night, when we look towards Bethlehem, let us pray in a special way for the birthplace of our Redeemer and for the men and women who live and suffer there. We wish to pray for peace in the Holy Land: Look, O Lord, upon this corner of the earth, your Homeland, which is so very dear to you! Let your light shine upon it! Let it know peace!

The word "peace" brings us to a third key to the liturgy of this holy Night. The Child foretold by Isaiah is called "Prince of Peace". His kingdom is said to be one "of endless peace". The shepherds in the Gospel hear the glad tidings: "Glory to God in the highest" and "on earth, peace...". At one time we used to say: "to men of good will". Nowadays we say "to those whom God loves". What does this change mean? Is good will no longer important? We would do better to ask: who are those whom God loves, and why does he love them? Does God have favourites? Does he love only certain people, while abandoning the others to themselves? The Gospel answers these questions by pointing to some particular people whom God loves. There are individuals, like Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon and Anna. But there are also two groups of people: the shepherds and the Wise Men from the East, the "Magi". Tonight let us look at the shepherds. What kind of people were they? In the world of their time, shepherds were looked down upon; they were considered untrustworthy and not admitted as witnesses in court. But really, who were they? To be sure, they were not great saints, if by that word we mean people of heroic virtue. They were simple souls. The Gospel sheds light on one feature which later on, in the words of Jesus, would take on particular importance: they were people who were watchful. This was

chiefly true in a superficial way: they kept watch over their flocks by night. But it was also true in a deeper way: they were ready to receive God's Word through the Angel's proclamation. Their life was not closed in on itself; their hearts were open. In some way, deep down, they were waiting for something; they were waiting for God. Their watchfulness was a kind of readiness – a readiness to listen and to set out. They were waiting for a light which would show them the way. That is what is important for God. He loves everyone, because everyone is his creature. But some persons have closed their hearts; there is no door by which his love can enter. They think that they do not need God, nor do they want him. Other persons, who, from a moral standpoint, are perhaps no less wretched and sinful, at least experience a certain remorse. They are waiting for God. They realize that they need his goodness, even if they have no clear idea of what this means. Into their expectant hearts God's light can enter, and with it, his peace. God seeks persons who can be vessels and heralds of his peace. Let us pray that he will not find our hearts closed. Let us strive to be active heralds of his peace – in the world of today.

Among Christians, the word "peace" has taken on a very particular meaning: it has become a word to designate communion in the Eucharist. There Christ's peace is present. In all the places where the Eucharist is celebrated, a great network of peace spreads through the world. The communities gathered around the Eucharist make up a kingdom of peace as wide as the world itself. When we celebrate the Eucharist we find ourselves in Bethlehem, in the "house of bread". Christ gives himself to us and, in doing so, gives us his peace. He gives it to us so that we can carry the light of peace within and give it to others. He gives it to us so that we can become peacemakers and builders of peace in the world. And so we pray: Lord, fulfil your promise! Where there is conflict, give birth to peace! Where there is hatred, make love spring up! Where darkness prevails, let light shine! Make us heralds of your peace! Amen.

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