



The Holy See

MIDNIGHT MASS

SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Saint Peter's Basilica
Thursday, 24 December 2009*

[Video]

Images of the celebration

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

“A child is born for us, a son is given to us” (Is 9:5). What Isaiah prophesied as he gazed into the future from afar, consoling Israel amid its trials and its darkness, is now proclaimed to the shepherds as a present reality by the Angel, from whom a cloud of light streams forth: “To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:11). The Lord is here. From this moment, God is truly “God with us”. No longer is he the distant God who can in some way be perceived from afar, in creation and in our own consciousness. He has entered the world. He is close to us. The words of the risen Christ to his followers are addressed also to us: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:20). For you the Saviour is born: through the Gospel and those who proclaim it, God now reminds us of the message that the Angel announced to the shepherds. It is a message that cannot leave us indifferent. If it is true, it changes everything. If it is true, it also affects me. Like the shepherds, then, I too must say: Come on, I want to go to Bethlehem to see the Word that has occurred there. The story of the shepherds is included in the Gospel for a reason. They show us the right way to respond to the message that we too have received. What is it that these first witnesses of God’s incarnation have to tell us?

The first thing we are told about the shepherds is that they were on the watch – they could hear

the message precisely because they were awake. We must be awake, so that we can hear the message. We must become truly vigilant people. What does this mean? The principal difference between someone dreaming and someone awake is that the dreamer is in a world of his own. His “self” is locked into this dreamworld that is his alone and does not connect him with others. To wake up means to leave that private world of one’s own and to enter the common reality, the truth that alone can unite all people. Conflict and lack of reconciliation in the world stem from the fact that we are locked into our own interests and opinions, into our own little private world.

Selfishness, both individual and collective, makes us prisoners of our interests and our desires that stand against the truth and separate us from one another. Awake, the Gospel tells us. Step outside, so as to enter the great communal truth, the communion of the one God. To awake, then, means to develop a receptivity for God: for the silent promptings with which he chooses to guide us; for the many indications of his presence. There are people who describe themselves as “religiously tone deaf”. The gift of a capacity to perceive God seems as if it is withheld from some. And indeed – our way of thinking and acting, the mentality of today’s world, the whole range of our experience is inclined to deaden our receptivity for God, to make us “tone deaf” towards him. And yet in every soul, the desire for God, the capacity to encounter him, is present, whether in a hidden way or overtly. In order to arrive at this vigilance, this awakening to what is essential, we should pray for ourselves and for others, for those who appear “tone deaf” and yet in whom there is a keen desire for God to manifest himself. The great theologian Origen said this: if I had the grace to see as Paul saw, I could even now (during the Liturgy) contemplate a great host of angels (cf. in Lk 23:9). And indeed, in the sacred liturgy, we are surrounded by the angels of God and the saints. The Lord himself is present in our midst. Lord, open the eyes of our hearts, so that we may become vigilant and clear-sighted, in this way bringing you close to others as well!

Let us return to the Christmas Gospel. It tells us that after listening to the Angel’s message, the shepherds said one to another: “Let us go over to Bethlehem’ ... they went at once” (Lk 2:15f.). “They made haste” is literally what the Greek text says. What had been announced to them was so important that they had to go immediately. In fact, what had been said to them was utterly out of the ordinary. It changed the world. The Saviour is born. The long-awaited Son of David has come into the world in his own city. What could be more important? No doubt they were partly driven by curiosity, but first and foremost it was their excitement at the wonderful news that had been conveyed to them, of all people, to the little ones, to the seemingly unimportant. They made haste – they went at once. In our daily life, it is not like that. For most people, the things of God are not given priority, they do not impose themselves on us directly. And so the great majority of us tend to postpone them. First we do what seems urgent here and now. In the list of priorities God is often more or less at the end. We can always deal with that later, we tend to think. The Gospel tells us: God is the highest priority. If anything in our life deserves haste without delay, then, it is God’s work alone. The Rule of Saint Benedict contains this teaching: “Place nothing at all before the work of God (i.e. the divine office)”. For monks, the Liturgy is the first priority. Everything else comes later. In its essence, though, this saying applies to everyone. God is important, by far the most important thing in our lives. The shepherds teach us this priority. From them we should learn

not to be crushed by all the pressing matters in our daily lives. From them we should learn the inner freedom to put other tasks in second place – however important they may be – so as to make our way towards God, to allow him into our lives and into our time. Time given to God and, in his name, to our neighbour is never time lost. It is the time when we are most truly alive, when we live our humanity to the full.

Some commentators point out that the shepherds, the simple souls, were the first to come to Jesus in the manger and to encounter the Redeemer of the world. The wise men from the East, representing those with social standing and fame, arrived much later. The commentators go on to say: this is quite natural. The shepherds lived nearby. They only needed to “come over” (cf. Lk 2:15), as we do when we go to visit our neighbours. The wise men, however, lived far away. They had to undertake a long and arduous journey in order to arrive in Bethlehem. And they needed guidance and direction. Today too there are simple and lowly souls who live very close to the Lord. They are, so to speak, his neighbours and they can easily go to see him. But most of us in the world today live far from Jesus Christ, the incarnate God who came to dwell amongst us. We live our lives by philosophies, amid worldly affairs and occupations that totally absorb us and are a great distance from the manger. In all kinds of ways, God has to prod us and reach out to us again and again, so that we can manage to escape from the muddle of our thoughts and activities and discover the way that leads to him. But a path exists for all of us. The Lord provides everyone with tailor-made signals. He calls each one of us, so that we too can say: “Come on, ‘let us go over’ to Bethlehem – to the God who has come to meet us. Yes indeed, God has set out towards us. Left to ourselves we could not reach him. The path is too much for our strength. But God has come down. He comes towards us. He has travelled the longer part of the journey. Now he invites us: come and see how much I love you. Come and see that I am here. *Transeamus usque Bethlehem*, the Latin Bible says. Let us go there! Let us surpass ourselves! Let us journey towards God in all sorts of ways: along our interior path towards him, but also along very concrete paths – the Liturgy of the Church, the service of our neighbour, in whom Christ awaits us.

Let us once again listen directly to the Gospel. The shepherds tell one another the reason why they are setting off: “Let us see this thing that has happened.” Literally the Greek text says: “Let us see this Word that has occurred there.” Yes indeed, such is the radical newness of this night: the Word can be seen. For it has become flesh. The God of whom no image may be made – because any image would only diminish, or rather distort him – this God has himself become visible in the One who is his true image, as Saint Paul puts it (cf. 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15). In the figure of Jesus Christ, in the whole of his life and ministry, in his dying and rising, we can see the Word of God and hence the mystery of the living God himself. This is what God is like. The Angel had said to the shepherds: “This will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger” (Lk 2:12; cf. 2:16). God’s sign, the sign given to the shepherds and to us, is not an astonishing miracle. God’s sign is his humility. God’s sign is that he makes himself small; he becomes a child; he lets us touch him and he asks for our love. How we would prefer a different sign, an imposing, irresistible sign of God’s power and greatness! But his sign summons us to faith

and love, and thus it gives us hope: this is what God is like. He has power, he is Goodness itself. He invites us to become like him. Yes indeed, we become like God if we allow ourselves to be shaped by this sign; if we ourselves learn humility and hence true greatness; if we renounce violence and use only the weapons of truth and love. Origen, taking up one of John the Baptist's sayings, saw the essence of paganism expressed in the symbol of stones: paganism is a lack of feeling, it means a heart of stone that is incapable of loving and perceiving God's love. Origen says of the pagans: "Lacking feeling and reason, they are transformed into stones and wood" (in Lk 22:9). Christ, though, wishes to give us a heart of flesh. When we see him, the God who became a child, our hearts are opened. In the Liturgy of the holy night, God comes to us as man, so that we might become truly human. Let us listen once again to Origen: "Indeed, what use would it be to you that Christ once came in the flesh if he did not enter your soul? Let us pray that he may come to us each day, that we may be able to say: I live, yet it is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me (Gal 2:20)" (in Lk 22:3).

Yes indeed, that is what we should pray for on this Holy Night. Lord Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem, come to us! Enter within me, within my soul. Transform me. Renew me. Change me, change us all from stone and wood into living people, in whom your love is made present and the world is transformed. Amen.

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