



The Holy See

POPE JOHN PAUL II

HOMILY - MIDNIGHT MASS

24 December 1996

1. "In the depths of the night a voice resounds" (*Polish Christmas carol*). In the first reading the Prophet Isaiah says: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined" (Is 9:1). The light shone because "to us a child is born, to us a son is given" (Is 9:5).

The same Christmas carol identifies that voice in the night: "Come, shepherds, God is born for you; hasten to Bethlehem to greet the Lord". It is the same voice which resounds in the passage of the Gospel of Luke just proclaimed: "In that region there were shepherds out in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. The angel said to them, 'Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people. For to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger'" (Lk 2:8-12).

The Christmas carol continues: "[The shepherds] set off, and in the manger they found the Child with all the signs which had foretold his birth. They adored him as God...".

2. What St Luke wrote in the Gospel about the birth of the Lord Jesus has been translated into countless songs and works of literature; these make up the rich tradition inspired by Christmas. We bring this tradition with us when we come to Midnight Mass, also called the "Mass of the Shepherds". At this hour, Bishops and priests throughout the world join me, the Bishop of Rome, in celebrating this Mass.

In every place liturgical and extra-liturgical songs are proclaiming *the joy of the Lord's birth*. The angel says: Be not afraid, rejoice! The birth of a human being is always a source of great rejoicing (cf. Jn 16:21). What great joy then must the birth of the God-Man bring! Isaiah says: "They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest" (Is 9:2). A remarkable harvest! Behold, humanity is ripe for this moment when the Creator is born "of woman". Man, created in the image and

likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:27), grows and journeys towards this God-Man, in whom he receives the gift of his own fulfilment and in whom, at the same time, all creation is raised to its fullness.

The responsorial psalm of this liturgy proclaims: “Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day” (Ps 96:1-2). And a *Christmas carol* echoes: “Let all creation sing to its Lord”. This invitation to praise resounds with particular eloquence. Behold: all creation, which the Apostle Paul will describe as “waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (Rom 8:19), *becomes a witness of the revelation of the Son of God in human flesh*. At the same time, this is the beginning and the foundation of the revelation of *those who have become sons and daughters of God* by reason of the divine adoption to which all people are called.

What profound reasons for joy the Lord’s birth gives us!

3. St Paul also speaks of these reasons in the Second Reading: “The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men” (Ti 2:11). The Son of God does not come into the world empty-handed. It is true that in the stable at Bethlehem he receives the gifts of the shepherds, but first he himself brings great gifts. His generosity is indescribable: “The loving Father offers us today ineffable gifts from heaven, as the Eternal Word becomes flesh, by his wondrous power” (*Christmas carol*).

Precisely that priceless gift which the Apostle calls “*grace*” — the gift of a share in the life of God, a universal gift, the opening of the path of eternal salvation — is the most profound source of Christmas joy.

With this joy in our hearts, we celebrate the solemn and beautiful night liturgy. We wish to join the choirs of angels who over the stable of Bethlehem are glorifying the Lord: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!” (Lk 2:14). We pray today for everyone, Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers alike. For we want to be faithful to the gift brought by God on Christmas night: *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, made manifest for all humanity*.

From this Basilica of St Peter’s, I send everyone a cordial greeting and I pray that this source of joy issuing forth in human history with the birth of the Son of God will be plentiful for all, so that each person may draw from it and quench his thirst. Yes, the fountain of salvation which God desires to offer to each human being has now been opened. It was for this very reason that he drew near to us and in his Son became like us: true God and true Man.

“God is born, man’s might is amazed. The Lord of heaven empties himself! The fire subsides, the splendour is veiled, the Infinite is encompassed” (F. Karpiński, *Christmas Song*). On this night the frontiers of human existence are extended. The Son of God, taking upon himself man’s limitations, opens before our eyes the prospect of God’s infinity.

“Natus est hodie Salvator mundi”.

Today is born the Saviour of the world.

Come, let us adore him!

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