



Today is born
our Savior!



Christmas
2007

Christmas 2007

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My dear friends,

Today let us share the Christmas moment which celebrates the birth of God in human flesh. We can observe this moment as a sentimental memory of a long ago event or even as an abstract dogma that confounds the limits of our reasoning. What makes Christmas a treasured gift is when we make the conscious choice to accept God's gift of His Son as the center of everything we dream and hope for, everything we seek and share.

I pray that this gift may be for you and for me ~ for all the human family. I pray for a gift of FAITH in Christ that is shared and lived.

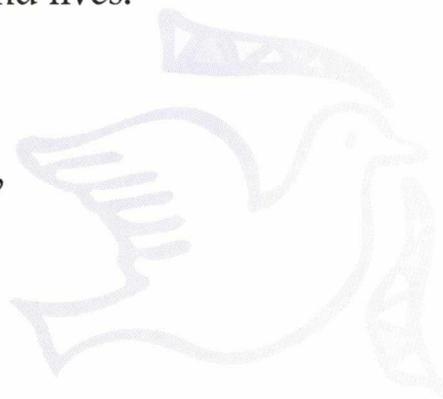
My personal blessings and love to all of you, to your families, and to every one of our children and young people. I pray with you for all who are suffering and struggling, and I offer the gratitude of our parish, to all who make Christ live among us by great generosity and willingness to serve the countless ministries that flourish among us. I welcome those of you who are new to our parish family, and I invite you to join us in the living Christ.

May Christ be the center of our hearts and lives.

For us—Christ is life!

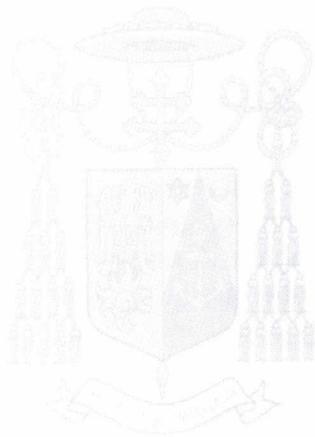
Wishing you a blessed Christmas,

Father Jack



Christmas 2007

ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO



OFFICE OF THE CARDINAL

Christmas 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The word of God became flesh in order to be present to us and redeem us in our flesh. When we find in God's word the sense of everything we are and all that we do, then all that we are and everything we do can speak of God. Our human flesh becomes eloquent. To speak with the voice of Christ, our hope, is to bring our mortal human flesh into eternity.

We are to become, in Christ, words of hope for all peoples, not just individually, one by one, but as the Body of Christ, the Church. In the Church, our flesh becomes word for the world. In Christ's own body we now find our voice, our purpose, our hope.

During the past ten years, I have visited every parish in the Archdiocese of Chicago. These visits give me great joy and I am continuously impressed by your vibrant faith, your genuine concern for and generous service on behalf of others. Let us ask Mary, the Mother of the Church, to intercede with her Son on our behalf, that we may continue to have the wisdom, faith and love to be, as Pope Benedict XVI encourages us in his recent encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, (On Christian Hope), "lights of hope" for each other and for the world. A blessed Christmas to all of you!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.
Archbishop of Chicago

Christmas 2007

A CHRISTMAS PLEDGE

I believe that Christmas is the joyful celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, that it commemorates an event that happened in history, and that it celebrates the reality of Jesus Christ being born again in our lives and our time. Therefore I commit myself to celebrate this in a way that is faithful to its true meaning.

Jesus is a radically free person; He came to liberate others. Therefore:

- I will examine my motives for celebrating Christmas.
- I will not spend money just to impress others.
- I will not engage in excess eating, drinking, partying or anything that reduces the freedom of myself or others.

Jesus respects all life; He came that we might have life in its fullness. Therefore:

- I will give gifts and do activities only if they enhance life for myself and for others.
- I will avoid gifts that are gadgets, made by complicated, energy-consuming processes that excessively pollute the environment.
- I will choose gifts that rely on the involvement, energy and ingenuity of the recipient.

Jesus cares about all people; He came to involve Himself with others. Therefore:

- I will celebrate Christmas by sharing of myself more than of my property.
- I will give gifts of service which involve my time, my work, my spoken and written words, my art, my song, my presence...and other things that are not objects, whenever possible.
- I will use some of my time to visit family, friends and those who have less, hurt more and seem to have been forgotten.
- I will choose gifts that involve me and/or the recipient in their creation and use.

Christmas 2007

A CHRISTMAS REFLECTION

WE SHALL BECOME CHRISTIANS ON THAT DAY WHEN SUNSHINE MEANS MORE TO US THAN A FURTHER ACQUISITION.

WE SHALL BECOME CHRISTIANS ON THAT DAY WHEN THE CHILDREN OF THE WORLD EXCITE US AT LEAST AS MUCH AS ITS RULERS.

WE SHALL BECOME CHRISTIANS ON THAT DAY WHEN WE USE OUR HEARTS TO MEASURE THE WORTH OF A HUMAN BEING.

WE SHALL BECOME CHRISTIANS ON THAT DAY WHEN LOVE LEADS US INTO FRIENDSHIPS, NOT GREED OR PRIDE.

WE SHALL BECOME CHRISTIANS WHEN WE ARE JOYFUL BECAUSE SO MANY PEOPLE ARE IN LOVE, RATHER THAN BECAUSE SO MANY PEOPLE ARE AFFLUENT.

WE SHALL BECOME CHRISTIANS WHEN WE LEARN TO MAKE LOVE AND PEACE; TO MAKE JESUS HUMAN AND TO MAKE OURSELVES AS HUMAN AS HE WAS.

WE SHALL BECOME CHRISTIANS WHEN WE ALLOW JESUS TO SPEAK TO US BY HIS VALUES AS WELL AS BY HIS WORDS.

WE SHALL BECOME CHRISTIANS ON THAT MORNING WHEN WE LAUGH AND SING FOR ALL THE RIGHT REASONS, AND WHEN WE WEEP NOT BECAUSE WE HAVE LOST SOMETHING, BUT BECAUSE WE WERE GIVEN SO MUCH.

MAY THE JOY, THE PEACE AND THE LIGHT OF THIS SEASON FILL YOU AND YOUR FAMILIES WITH THE HOPE OF THE CHRISTMAS SEASON.

FR. TOM BISHOP, ASSOCIATE PASTOR



Christmas Midnight, 2007 (14ABC)

Isaiah 9:1-6 (USCCB)

- ¹ The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.
- ² You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing,
as they rejoice before you as at the harvest, as people make merry when dividing spoils.
- ³ For the yoke that burdened them, the pole on their shoulder,
and the rod of their taskmaster you have smashed, as on the day of Midian.
- ⁴ For every boot that tramped in battle, every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for
flames.
- ⁵ For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests.
They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.
- ⁶ His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne, and over his kingdom,
which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this!

Psalm 96:1-2, 2-3, 11-12, 13. *Today is born our Savior, Christ the LORD.*

Titus 2:11-14 (USCCB)

Beloved:

- ¹¹ The grace of God has appeared, saving all
¹² and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires
and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age,
¹³ as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of the great God
and of our savior Jesus Christ,
¹⁴ who gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness
and to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good.

Luke 2:1-14 (USCCB)

- ¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled.
² This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.
³ So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town.
⁴ And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea,
to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David,
⁵ to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.
- ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to have her child,⁷ and she gave birth to her first-
born son.
She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger,
because there was no room for them in the inn.
- ⁸ Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields
and keeping the night watch over their flock.
⁹ The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were struck with great fear.
¹⁰ The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid;
for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.
¹¹ For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord.
¹² And this will be a sign for you:
you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."
¹³ And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel,
praising God and saying:
¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

It is difficult for us moderns to escape the many years of overlaying our own vision of Christmas onto the story that Luke tells of the birth. We Christians make much of this narrative yet it is important to put it in the perspective that Luke intends along with the cultural context of the time. Luke and Matthew are the only books of the 27 that comprise the Christian scriptures to mention the birth in a significant way but their purpose is not historical. (Besides, the two are at variance in several key ways!)

Recall that Luke writes to a Mediterranean audience sometime around the 80's and that like the other evangelists his purpose is not to outline history (certainly not in the scientific sense) but in his case, to provide assurance that God's promises to Israel have been fulfilled in Jesus and that this salvation extends even beyond the chosen People to the pagans. Luke, in short, is writing theology, not history.

Remember also that **honor/shame** are the core values in Mediterranean society and that everything, even physical survival, is dependent on maintaining that honor. Honor is the social position that a person claims in the community and the accompanying public recognition of that claim by the community.

Therefore, honor makes possible appropriate or presible interaction among equals, and between superiors and inferiors. (Think, for example, of the status of lepers in the gospel stories.) **Ascribed** honor derives from being born into a certain family; being born into an honorable family confers honorable status. Conversely, being born into a family of shepherds is a dishonorable social position (see below). **Acquired** honor comes from winning in the ever-present game of **challenge and riposte**. A challenge must always be answered; a gift, for example, requires reciprocity. The challenge of an insult requires a like or better response with the risk of irreparable loss of status in the event of failure.

These are no small considerations; it is social life and death. The honor status of the family rigidly determines who marriage partners can be, with whom members can associate, for example, which functions they can attend (not all are welcome at all tables; recall the response when Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors), where they can live, or with whom they can do business. So the family honor costs or it will slip down the scale; loss of honor by one member diminishes the *entire*

I emphasize the cultural setting. What does it have to do with the Feast of Christmas? Appreciation of the mindset of Luke's audience can sharpen our vision to see beyond our modern Western images and into the power of the passage that Luke intended for his immediate readers.

Luke is the gospel writer who highlights that Jesus offers salvation to *all* peoples; the whole world is invited! In vv. 1-3 he plays a bit with history (there is no secular corroboration of a census of the whole world) in order to set Jesus' birth clearly within a framework larger than the concern of Judeans. How fitting that he mentions Augustus Caesar, the one responsible for the peace Rome imposed throughout the Roman world (*pax Romana*); Luke's Prince of Peace brings peace to those *beyond* the house of Israel. In v. 4, the birth in Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral "hometown," further identifies Jesus as having honor because he is part of the lineage of David, the King. [Matthew, on the other hand, ascribes honor (status) to Jesus by depicting Joseph as accepting Jesus as his very own son, thereby not only legitimizing Jesus but establishing him as descendant of David.]

(continued on back cover)

Sharing the Living Story (conclusion)

There is much in v.7 that needs a cultural lens. There probably was no inn! Bethlehem was a town of just more than 100 persons. A commercial inn would be more likely found in Jerusalem, two hours away. More importantly, Joseph goes to Bethlehem, to register for land tax purposes. Presumably, in this ancestral hometown, there would be family with whom he would be obligated to stay for honor sake. In the very unlikely event that there was no family, he would still be acknowledged as belonging to that village and again, in fulfillment of honor, would be accommodated in somebody's abode. The Greek word normally translated as "inn" refers to the space in which guests were placed in a peasant home. The family occupied the raised (stepped) end of a large room and their animals the lower end; in between was the manger, or feeding area, where birthing normally occurred. That *there was no room for them* more likely indicates that there was already a guest(s) of higher rank present.

Although we customarily think of shepherds in perhaps romantic terms they were members of a rather low social

class. They were lumped with ass drivers and camel drivers, tanners, and butchers and other despised occupations. They were considered without honor, as they could not protect their women because they were away from home at night; they were also without honor because they grazed the flocks wherever there was something to eat without regard to property ownership. And they stank! Yet, that they were the low end of class structure further underscores that Jesus came for all – hence was universal. It was to these despised ones that the great proclamation of vv.10 & 11 is made: *good news of great joy that will be for all the people.* [Recall that a claim to honor must be publicly validated; Luke carefully records the proclamation (made privately to the shepherds) and just as carefully records the public acclamation of the shepherds at vv.17, 18, 20.]

At v.11, Luke insists that it is in the line of David that there is born *a savior . . . who is Messiah and Lord.* In David's city is born the Savior, the Anointed One, which we Christians see in the words of Isaiah in today's first reading. This One will bring joy that sur-

passes the joy of a good harvest or the dividing of spoils a great victory (v.2.). This One will bring salvation surpassing the liberation experienced at Midian when the yoke of oppression by the pagan Midianites was lifted (v.3.). The titles of the child born to us (v.5) combine the best of human attributes with the characteristics of a heaven appointed king. The human attributes are: he will be **-Counselor** (have sharp political insight with sound ability to judge justly); he will be **-Hero** (possess military might); he will be **Father-** (have great solicitude for his people); he will be **Prince-** (a leader with a tie to the King). Paired with these four are characteristics that are gifts that can come only from heaven: **Wonder, God, Forever, Peace**; these God-gifts are the essence of God's reign described in v.6, *...dominion is over all...forever peaceful... judgment and justice...both now and forever.*

The Letter to Titus puts it succinctly:

The grace of God has appeared, saving all...

The psalm refrain proclaims it: *Today is born our Savior, Christ the LORD.*

So What?

Luke upholds the claim to high honor made for Jesus and clearly extends the meaning of Jesus as Savior beyond the expectation of the messiah expected by Israel by including *all* peoples, that is, gentiles as well as The Chosen. (On whom **does** God's favor rest?)

Given these insights made through the Mediterranean cultural lens, in what new ways could we today celebrate the Christmas story and make a connection to, say, Good Friday, or Easter Sunday – or any other day of the week?