



MIDNIGHT MASS

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER*Christmas, 24 December 2001*

1. *"Populus, qui ambulabat in tenebris, vidit lucem magnam – The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light"* (Is 9:1).

Every year we listen again to these words of the Prophet Isaiah in the moving context of the liturgical re-evocation of Christ's Birth. Every year these words take on new meaning and cause us to relive the atmosphere of expectation and hope, of amazement and joy typical of Christmas.

To the people, oppressed and suffering, who walked in darkness, there appeared "a great light". A truly "great" light indeed, because the light which radiates from the humility of the crib is the light of the new creation. If the first creation began with light (cf. Gen 1:3), how much more splendid and "great" is the light which inaugurates the new creation: it is God himself made man!

Christmas is an event of light, it is the feast of light: in the Child of Bethlehem the primordial light once more shines in humanity's heaven and dissipates the clouds of sin. The radiance of God's definitive triumph appears on the horizon of history in order to offer a new future of hope to a pilgrim people.

2. *"Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone"* (Is 9:1).

These joyful tidings, proclaimed just now in our assembly, are also meant for us, the men and women of the dawn of the third millennium. Throughout the world the community of believers gathers in prayer to listen to it once again. Amid the cold and snow of winter or in the torrid heat of the tropics, tonight is a Holy Night for all.

Long awaited, the splendour of the new Day at last shines forth. The Messiah is born, Emmanuel, God-with-us! He is born, who was announced by the Prophets of old and long invoked by all *"who dwelt in the land of gloom"*. In the silence and the darkness of the night, the light becomes a word and message of hope.

But does this certainty of faith not seem to clash with the way things are today? If we listen to the relentless news headlines, these words of light and hope may seem like words from a dream. But that is precisely the challenge of faith, which makes this proclamation at once comforting and demanding. It make us feel that we are wrapped in the tender love of God, while at the same time it commits us to a practical love of God and of our neighbour.

3. *"The grace of God has appeared, offering salvation to all"* (Tit 2:11).

Our hearts this Christmas are anxious and distressed because of the continuation in various parts of the world of war, social tensions, and the painful hardships in which so many people find themselves. We are all seeking an answer that will reassure us.

The passage from the Letter to Titus which we have just heard reminds us that the birth of the Only-begotten Son of the Father has been revealed as *"an offer of salvation"* in every corner of the earth, at every time in history. The Child who is named *"Wonder-Counsellor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace"* (Is 9:5) is born for every man and woman. He brings with him the answer which can calm our fears and reinvigorate our hope.

Yes, in this night filled with sacred memories, our trust in the redemptive power of the Word made flesh is confirmed. When darkness and evil seem to prevail, Christ tells us once more: Fear not! By his coming into the world he has vanquished the power of evil, freed us from the slavery of death and brought us back to the banquet of life.

It is up to us to draw from the power of his victorious love by appropriating his "logic" of service and humility. Each of us is called to overcome with Christ "the mystery of iniquity", by becoming witnesses of solidarity and builders of peace. Let us go then to the cave of Bethlehem to meet him, and to meet, in him, all the world's children, every one of our brothers and sisters afflicted in body or oppressed in spirit.

4. The shepherds, *"once they had seen, made known what had been told them concerning this child"* (Lk 2:17).

Like the shepherds, we too on this wonderful night cannot fail to experience the desire to share with others the joy of our encounter with this *"child wrapped in swaddling cloths"*, in whom the saving power of the Almighty is revealed. We cannot pause in ecstatic contemplation of the Messiah lying in the manger, and forget our obligation to bear witness to him.

In haste we must once more set out on our journey. With joy we must leave the cave of Bethlehem in order to recount everywhere the marvel which we have witnessed. We have encountered light and life! In him, love has been bestowed upon us.

5. *"A child is born to us..."* .

We welcome you with joy, Almighty Lord of heaven and earth, who out of love became a Child *"in Judea, in the city of David, which is called Bethlehem"* (Lk 2:4).

We welcome you with gratitude, new Light rising in the night of the world.

We welcome you as our brother, the *"Prince of Peace"* , who *"made of the two one people"* (cf. Eph 2:14).

Fill us with your gifts, you who did not hesitate to begin human life like us. Make us children of God, you who for our sake desired to become a son of man (cf. Saint Augustine, *Homilies* , 184).

You, *"Wonder-Counsellor"* , sure promise of peace; you, powerful presence of the *"God-Hero"* ; you, our one God, who lie poor and humble in the dim light of the stable, welcome us around your crib.

Come, peoples of the earth, open to him the doors of your history! Come to worship the Son of the Virgin Mary, who descended among us, on this night prepared for down the centuries.

Night of joy and peace.

Venite, adoremus!

