

Bethlehem

Making room for Jesus, making room for every person

ECCLESIA

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***Pierbattista
Pizzaballa****



Dearly beloved,

May the Lord give you peace!

I would like tonight to give voice to a deep feeling that I believe we all feel, and which is echoed in the Gospel just proclaimed: "because there was no place for them" (Lk 2:7). As with Mary and Joseph, for us here today there seems to be no place for Christmas. We have all been gripped, for too many days, by the painful, sad feeling that there is no place, this year, for that joy and peace that on this holy night, just a few metres from here, the angels announced to the shepherds in Bethlehem.

At this moment, we cannot but think of all those who in this war have been left with nothing, displaced, alone, affected in their dearest affections, paralysed by their pain. My thoughts go out to all, without distinction, Palestinians and Israelis, to all those affected by this war, to all those who mourn and grieve and wait for a sign of closeness and warmth. My thoughts, in particular, go to Gaza and its two million inhabitants. Truly that 'there was no place for them' expresses well their situation, known to all today and whose suffering does not cease to cry out to the whole world. No longer do they have a safe place, a home, a roof, deprived of the essentials of life, starving, and even more exposed to incomprehensible violence.

There seems to be no place for them not only physically, but not even in the minds of those who decide the fate of peoples. This is the situation in which the Palestinian people have been living for too long, who, despite living in their own land, are constantly told: 'there is no place for them', and have been waiting for decades for the international community to find solutions to end the occupation, under which they are forced to live, and its consequences. It seems to me that today everyone is locked in their own grief. Hatred, resentment and the spirit of revenge occupy all the heart's space, and leave no room for the presence of the other. Yet, the other is necessary to us. Because Christmas is just that, it is God making himself humanly present, and opening our hearts to a new way of looking at the world.

Not that the world has always been hospitable to Christ: the realisation that the Christian faith, and Christian Christmas in particular, are now scarcely traceable in our secularised and consumerist culture is not new. This year, however, especially here, but also in the rest of the world, the clangour of weapons, the weeping of children, the suffering of refugees, the lament of the poor, the tears of so many mourners in so many families seem to make our songs out of tune, our joy difficult, our words empty and rhetorical.

Let it be clear: the coming of Christ into our world has opened for us and for all "the way of eternal salvation", which nothing and no one will ever be able to close. The faith, hope and love of the Church of God are indefectible and rest on the faithful

Promise of the Lord, and do not depend on the changing times and circumstances, more or less adverse, that surround us.

It is equally evident, however, that we struggle, especially here today, to find a place for Christmas in our land, in our lives, in our hearts. That way, opened by Christ, we risk losing it among the destroyed streets, among the rubble of war, among abandoned houses. Our burdened hearts may fail to sympathise with the proclamation of Christmas. Too much pain, too much disappointment, too many broken promises crowd that inner space where the Gospel of Christmas can resonate and inspire actions and behaviour of peace and life.

Let us ask ourselves then: where is Christmas this year? Where should we look for the Saviour? Where can the Child be born, when there seems to be no place for Him in this world of ours?

It was the question of Mary and Joseph, faced with the difficulty of finding lodging that night, as we have heard. It was the question of the Shepherds, as they searched for the Child. It was the question of the Magi, as they chased the star. It was the question of the Church whenever it lost its way. It is our question this evening: what is the place of Christmas today?

And answering us are the Angels. For on that night, and on every night, God always finds a place for His Christmas, even for us, here, today, despite everything, even in these dramatic circumstances, we believe so: God can make room even in the hardest of hearts.

Place for Christmas is first and foremost God. The Christmas of Christ takes place in the beginning in the merciful Heart of the Father. His infinite and inexhaustible love eternally generates His Son and gives Him to us in time, even in this time. It is in His good and holy will that mankind's salvation was decided. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:16-17). In the present circumstances, we, the whole Church, must return to God, to His love, if we want to rediscover the true joy of Christmas, if we want to meet the Saviour. Before and beyond all social and political explanations, violence and the overpowering of the other find their ultimate root in having forgotten God, counterfeited His Face, used the religious relationship with Him in an instrumental and false way, as happens all too often in this Holy Land of ours. He cannot call God 'Father' who does not know how to call his fellow man 'brother'. It is

even more true, however, that we cannot recognise ourselves as brothers if we do not return to the true God, recognising Him as a Father who loves everyone. If we do not rediscover God in our lives, we will inevitably lose our way at Christmas and find ourselves wandering alone in the aimless night, prey to our violent and selfish instincts.

But Mary and Joseph's 'yes' is also the place of Christmas. Their obedience and faithfulness is the house in which the Son came to dwell. God's will is not a power that subdues and bends, but a Love that unfolds its full force only when accepted in faithful and generous freedom, true freedom, which is not arbitrariness but loving responsibility for our lives and the lives of others. The Son of God, begotten of the Father, enters into time through the open door of human freedom. Wherever a man and a woman say "yes" to God, there it is Christmas! Wherever someone is willing to put his or her life at the service of the Peace that comes from on High, and not just looking after his or her own interests, there the Son is born and reborn. So if we want it to be Christmas, even in times of war, we must all multiply gestures of fraternity, of peace, of welcome, of forgiveness, of reconciliation. I will say more: we must all commit ourselves, starting with me and those who, like me, have responsibilities of leadership and social, political and religious guidance, to create a 'yes mentality' against the 'no strategy'.

Saying yes to good, yes to peace, yes to dialogue, yes to the other must not be just rhetoric but a responsible commitment, willing to make space, not occupy it, to find a place for the other and not deny it. Christmas was made possible by the space that Mary and Joseph offered to God and the Child who came from Him. It will be no different for Justice and Peace: there will be no justice, no peace without the space opened by our willing and generous 'yes'.

It would not be Christmas without the Shepherds. Even their vigil in the night belongs to the Gospel. And they are the first to find the Child. The evangelist Luke does not linger so much on their social condition as on their interiority. They were the shepherds, that night, people awake, used to the essentials, capable of action, open to the new, without too much calculation or reasoning and therefore ready for Christmas. In a time inevitably marked by resignation, hatred, anger, depression, we need Christians like this so that there is still room for Christmas! To this beloved Diocese of mine, to its priests, seminarians, men and women religious, committed laymen and women, all the parish communities with their groups and associations, I feel I must remind you that we are heirs of those shepherds. I know well how difficult it is to remain awake, available to welcome and to give, ready to start again and again, to set out again even if it is still night. Only in this way will we find the Child. But this alone is the testimony that ensures that Christmas still has a place in this time and in this land, that

it radiates from here to the whole world. We are here and we intend to continue to be the shepherds of Christmas. Those, that is to say, who, albeit in poor and fragile conditions, found the Child, experienced its grace and consolation, and wish to proclaim to all that Christmas is, today as yesterday, real and true.

Dearly beloved, I have in my heart a wish that becomes a prayer: May our will to do good, made concrete by our responsible and generous "yes", by our commitment to love and to serve, be the space in which Christ can be born again and again!

I ask this for myself and for my Church in the Holy Land and for every Church: may it be a home for all, a space of reconciliation and forgiveness for all those who seek joy and peace! I ask all the Churches in the world, which at this moment look to us not only to contemplate the mystery of Bethlehem, but also to support us in this tragic war: be bearers to your peoples and their rulers of the "yes" to God, of the desire for good for these our peoples, for the cessation of hostilities, so that all may truly find home and peace.

I pray that Christ may be reborn in the hearts of the rulers and leaders of nations, and suggest to them His own 'Yes' that led Him to become our friend and brother and brother to all, so that they may work earnestly to stop this war, but above all so that they may resume a dialogue that will finally lead to finding just, dignified and definitive solutions for our peoples. The tragedy of this moment, in fact, tells us that it is no longer time for short-term tactics, of references to a theoretical future, but that it is time to say, here and now, a clear, definitive word of truth, that resolves the current conflict at its roots, removes its root causes and opens new horizons of serenity and justice for all, for the Holy Land but also for our entire region, also marked by this conflict. Words like occupation and security, and the many other similar words that have dominated our respective discourses for too long, must be reinforced by trust and respect, because this is what we want the future to be for this land, and only this will guarantee true stability and peace.

May Christ then be reborn in this land, His and ours, and may the path of the Gospel of peace for the whole world begin again from here! May He be reborn in the hearts of those who believe in Him, moving them to witness and mission, without the fear of night and death! And be reborn also in the hearts of those who do not yet believe, as a desire for peace and goodness, truth and justice!

May Christ also be born in our small community of Gaza. I used to spend a few days with you, dear ones, before Christmas. This year it was not possible, but we do not

abandon you. You are in our hearts, and the entire Christian community of the Holy Land and around the world huddles around you, may you feel the warmth of our vocation and affection as much as possible.

Finally, may Christ be reborn in the hearts of all, so that for all it may still be Christmas! Merry Christmas!

**** Cardinal, Patriarch of Jerusalem of the Latins***