

CHRISTMAS

The birth of Jesus is the central event in the history of humanity

ECCLESIA

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*Saint John
Paul II*



Homily at Midnight Mass of Saint Giovanni Paolo II, December 1994.

1. *"Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy... ; for to you is born this day... a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10-11).*

Today! This "today" which resounds in the liturgy does not refer only to the event which took place two thousand years ago and which changed the history of the world. It also refers to this Holy Night in which we are gathered here, in Saint Peter's Basilica, in spiritual communion with all those throughout the world who are celebrating the Solemnity of Christmas. Even in the farthest reaches of the five Continents there resound tonight the angelic words heard by the shepherds of Bethlehem: "Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy... ; for to you is born this day... a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10-11).

Jesus was born in a stable, as the Gospel of Luke recounts, "because there was no room for them in the inn" (Lk 2:7). Mary, his Mother, and Joseph had not found a welcome in any house in Bethlehem. Mary had to lay the Saviour of the world in a manger, the only cradle available for the Son of God made man. This is the reality of the Lord's Nativity. Every year we return to it: thus we rediscover it, thus we experience it every time with unchanged wonder.

2. The birth of the Messiah! It is the central event in the history of humanity. The whole human race was awaiting it with a vague presentiment; the Chosen People awaited with explicit awareness.

A privileged witness of this expectation, throughout the entire liturgical season of Advent and also at this solemn vigil, is the Prophet Isaiah who, from the distant centuries directs his inspired gaze to this single, future night at Bethlehem. Although he lived many centuries earlier, he speaks of this event and its mystery as if he were an eyewitness of it: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given" - *"Puer natus est nobis, Filius datus est nobis"* (Is 9:6).

Such is the historical event imbued with mystery: a tender child is born, fully human but at the same time the only-begotten Son of the Father. He is the Son, not made but eternally begotten, the Son of one being with the Father. "God from God, light from light, true God from true God". He is the Word, "through whom all things were made".

We shall soon proclaim these truths in the Creed and add: "For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man". Professing our faith together with

the whole Church, this night too we shall acknowledge the amazing grace which the Lord's mercy bestows on us.

Israel, the People of God of the Old Covenant, was chosen to bring to the world, as a "shoot from the stump of David", the Messiah, the Saviour and Redeemer of all humanity. Together with an outstanding representative of that People, the Prophet Isaiah, let us therefore turn to Bethlehem with our eyes lifted in expectation of the Messiah. In the divine light we can glimpse how the Old Covenant is being fulfilled and how, with Christ's birth, a New and Eternal Covenant is being revealed.

3. Saint Paul speaks of this New Covenant in the Letter to Titus which we have just heard: "The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men" (Tit 2:11). Precisely this grace enables humanity to live "awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ", who "gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds" (Tit 2:14).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, this message of grace is today addressed to us! Listen, then! To all "whom God loves", to all who accept the invitation to pray and keep vigil on this Holy Christmas Night, I repeat with joy: God's love for us has been revealed! His love is grace and faithfulness, mercy and truth! By setting us free from the darkness of sin and death, he has become the firm and unshakeable foundation of the hope of every human being.

The liturgical song repeats this with joyful insistence: Come, let us adore him! Come from every part of the world to contemplate what has taken place in the grotto ion.

4. How unsearchably deep is the mystery of the Incarnation! Abundantly rich, in turn, is the Christmas Liturgy: in the Masses of Midnight, Dawn and Christmas Day, various liturgical texts cast successive rays of light on this great event which the Lord wants to make known to all who await him and seek him (cf. Lk 2:15).

In the mystery of Christmas is fully reflected the truth of his plan of salvation for man and for the world. It is not only man who is to be saved, but all creation is invited to sing to the Lord a new song, to rejoice and to exult together with all the nations of the earth (cf. Ps 96).

It was this very song of praise which resounded with solemn magnificence over the poor stable at Bethlehem. We read in Saint Luke that the heavenly host praised God saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is

pleased" (Lk 2:14).

In God is the fullness of glory. On this night the glory of God becomes the inheritance of all creation and, in particular, of mankind. Yes, the Eternal Son, the eternal object of the Father's pleasure, became man, and his earthly birth on Christmas night testifies once and for all that in him every man is included in the mystery of God's love, which is the source of definitive peace.

"Peace among men with whom he is pleased". Yes, peace to humanity! This is my Christmas wish. Dear Brothers and Sisters, during this night and throughout the Christmas Octave, let us implore from the Lord this much needed grace. Let us pray that all humanity will come to know in the Son of Mary, born in Bethlehem, the Redeemer of the world who brings us the gift of love and peace.

Amen!