

The Bishop's Message
December 2008

THE BLESSING OF CHRISTMAS

The greatest story ever told began on the first Christmas morning when Jesus Christ was born. It is the penultimate time of joy, hope and peace. Above all, Christmas is about God's love for all mankind; and it reminds us that with God all things, in accordance with His will, are not only possible, they are ordained by His providence.

Christmas is a festival of light. At a time when the days are the shortest, people gather in the silent night of a midnight service to sing, "Christ the Savior is born" and hear again the words of the Prophet Isaiah; "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Is 9:2).

Reality dictates that every living creature dwells in the shadow of death. Comprehending the true meaning of Christmas, we rejoice at our deliverance from eternal death through Jesus' Easter victory, and we proclaim that because of His coming into the world we are set free from slavery to sin. The power of the oppressor is broken!

The Holy Child whose birth is celebrated at Christmas was born to rule. We know him as "Wonderful Counselor." His coming is divinely planned and He is heralded as "Mighty God" because He is the incarnation of God's own presence with us.

The Christ Child as "Messiah" is also "Reconciler" because He brings us into a new relationship of peace with our Father, "Abba." And because we are so reconciled with God, we have true fellowship with one another. Indeed, He is the "Prince of Peace."

Along with the Old Testament's anticipatory words, we read and meditate on St. Luke's account of the Nativity, which is placed within the wider context of a Gentile world. Luke shows that the God of Israel uses Augustus, the greatest political figure of the day – the author of *Pax Romana*, who referred to himself as "savior of the world" – as an instrument to fulfill God's providence and His divine purpose. Significantly for Luke is that the Holy Child has entered human life in the most humble of circumstances. Bethlehem was a small, out-of-the-way place. Apparently there was only one inn, and by the time Mary and Joseph arrived, all of its rooms had been taken. So even at so tender an age -- as stated in the 58th verse of the 9th Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke -- the "Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Regardless of the lowly, immediate conditions, the requirement for the birth of Jesus had been met. And this Jesus, who was born in such circumstances with only the barest of hospitality, became in His ministry the

host to a displaced and a dispossessed humanity. Even at His Nativity, the world's rejection of the Messiah had already begun.

Residing east of Bethlehem were shepherds – simple, ordinary, working folk with no wealth or privilege. They, of all people, could believe that a Holy Child would be born in a manger, since many of them may not have been able to do better for their own children.

The message the angel gives links Jesus to King David and proclaims Him to be Savior, Messiah and Lord. Each of these titles reflects the saving activity of God that is dawning in and will be manifested through Jesus, whom Luke will later describe as “the Son of Man” who “came to seek out and to save the lost” (Lk19:10). As Savior, Jesus rescues humanity from the power of sin and its ensuing alienation from God.

Heaven rejoices at the birth in Bethlehem. Angel choirs sing the *Gloria in excelsis* because of the “good news of great joy for all the people” (Lk 2:10) which the angel had announced to the shepherds. So, in a real way, our Christmas is a pilgrimage to the stable in Bethlehem where we, too, offer thankful worship for the blessing of the Messiah whose life and sacrifice have brought salvation for us and all the world.

Any real thankfulness for this gracious and merciful kindness of God is expressed in the way we live. To “keep” Christmas is to renounce every thought and action that would not be consistent with the manner of Jesus' ministry on earth. As He gave himself for us to redeem us from our iniquities, so we now, by God's grace, give ourselves to Him in a disciplined life of righteousness that joyfully anticipates greeting Him as our Redeemer at His triumphal return in glory on the last day.

Even for us who have celebrated many Christmases, it remains a new song that we sing to the Lord as we declare by both word and deed God's wonders. We ascribe to God the honor due His Divine Name. We worship Him in the beauty of holiness and proclaim “the Lord is King,” even as we welcome God's healing judgment in our lives. We then are empowered to receive Christmas, Christ-Mass -- Savior-Sent -- with open hearts and become an extension of God's own blessing of Incarnate Love for the stark reality of this love starved world.

I pray all who read this will rejoice in the fact that God the Father has blessed us more than we are worthy to ask by the Incarnation of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, at Christmas through the power of the Holy Spirit for the salvation of all mankind. This is the one and only true blessing of Christmas.