

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHL

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 161224a

Saturday 24.12.2016

Midnight Mass: Christmas has the taste of hope

This evening the Holy Father presided at the midnight Mass of Christmas 2016 in St. Peter's Basilica. After the Gospel reading the Pope pronounced a homily in which he affirmed that it is necessary to let oneself be challenged by the Child in the Nativity, Who "calls us to leave behind fleeting illusions and to turn to what is essential", but also by those children who lie in squalid "mangers that devour dignity". Francis emphasised that Christmas is a mystery of hope and sadness: of sadness "inasmuch as love is not accepted, and life discarded", but most of all hope, as God, Who loves us, "draws us to Himself with His tenderness, by being born poor and frail in our midst, as one of us".

The following is the full text of the Holy Father's homily:

"The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all" (Tit 2:11). The words of the Apostle Paul reveal the mystery of this holy night: the grace of God has appeared, His free gift. In the Child given to us, the love of God is made visible.

It is a night of glory, that glory proclaimed by the angels in Bethlehem and by ourselves as well, all over the world. It is a night of joy, because henceforth and for ever, the infinite and eternal God is God with us. He is not far off. We need not search for Him in the heavens or in mystical notions. He is close at hand. He became man and He will never withdraw from our humanity, which He has made his own. It is a night of light. The light prophesied by Isaiah (cf. 9:1), which was to shine on those who walked in a land of darkness, has appeared and enveloped the shepherds of Bethlehem (cf. Lk 2:9).

The shepherds discover simply that "a child has been born to us" (Is 9:5). They realise that all this glory, all this joy, all this light, converges to a single point, the sign that the angel indicated to them: "You will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:12). This is the enduring sign for all who would find Jesus. Not just then, but also today. If we want to celebrate Christmas authentically, we need to contemplate this sign: the frail simplicity of a tiny newborn child, the meekness with which He is placed in a manger, the tender affection with which He is wrapped in His swaddling clothes. That is where God is.

With this sign, the Gospel reveals a paradox. It speaks of the emperor, the governor, the high and mighty of

those times, yet God does not make himself present there. He appears not in the splendour of a royal palace, but in the poverty of a stable; not in pomp and show, but in simplicity of life; not in power, but in astonishing smallness. In order to meet him, we need to go where He is. We need to bow down, to humble ourselves, to make ourselves small. The newborn Child challenges us. He calls us to leave behind fleeting illusions and to turn to what is essential, to renounce our insatiable cravings, to abandon our endless yearning for things we will never have. We do well to leave such things behind, in order to discover, in the simplicity of the divine Child, peace, joy and the luminous meaning of life.

Let us allow the Child in the manger to challenge us, but let us also be challenged by all those children in today's world who are lying not in a crib, caressed with affection by their mothers and fathers, but in squalid "mangers that devour dignity". Children who hide underground to escape bombardment, on the pavements of large cities, in the hold of a boat overlaid with immigrants... Let us allow ourselves to be challenged by those children who are not allowed to be born, by those who cry because no one relieves their hunger, by those who hold in their hands not toys, but weapons.

The mystery of Christmas, which is light and joy, challenges and unsettles us, because it is at once a mystery of hope and of sadness. It has a taste of sadness, inasmuch as love is not accepted, and life discarded. Such was the case with Joseph and Mary, who met with closed doors, and placed Jesus in a manger, "because there was no place for them in the inn" (v. 7). Jesus was born rejected by some and regarded by many others with indifference. Today too, that same indifference can exist, whenever Christmas becomes a holiday with ourselves at the centre rather than Jesus; when the lights of shop windows push the light of God into the shadows; when we are enthused about gifts but indifferent to our neighbours in need. This worldliness has kidnapped Christmas; we need to liberate it!

Yet Christmas has above all a taste of hope because, for all the darkness in our lives, God's light shines forth. His gentle light does not frighten us. God, Who is in love with us, draws us to Himself with His tenderness, by being born poor and frail in our midst, as one of us. He is born in Bethlehem, which means "house of bread". In this way, He seems to tell us that He is born as bread for us; He enters our life to give us His life; He comes into our world to give us His love. He does not come to devour or to lord over us, but instead to feed and serve us. There is a straight line between the manger and the cross where Jesus will become bread that is broken. It is the straight line of love that gives and saves, the love that brings light to our lives and peace to our hearts.

That night, the shepherds understood this. They were among the marginalised of those times. Yet no one is marginalised in the sight of God, and that Christmas, they themselves were the guests. People who felt sure of themselves, self-sufficient, were at home with their possessions. It was the shepherds who "set out with haste" (cf. Lk 2:16). Tonight, may we too be challenged and called by Jesus. Let us approach Him with trust, starting from all those things that make us feel marginalised, from our limitations and our sins. Let us be touched by the tenderness that saves. Let us draw close to God who draws close to us. Let us pause to gaze upon the crib, and relive in our imagination the birth of Jesus: light and peace, dire poverty and rejection. With the shepherds, let us enter into the real Christmas, bringing to Jesus all that we are, our alienation, our unhealed wounds, our sins. Then, in Jesus, we will enjoy the taste of the true spirit of Christmas: the beauty of being loved by God. With Mary and Joseph, let us pause before the manger, before Jesus Who is born as bread for my life. Contemplating His humble and infinite love, let us simply tell Him: Thank you. Thank you because you have done all this for me.
