

## Christmas Mass

Holy Rosary Cathedral

25 December 2017

Dear brother priests, deacons, parishioners, and especially dear visitors: all who have gathered in our Cathedral to celebrate the birth of our Saviour, who is Christ the Lord:

### *Introduction*

Today we rejoice because we have heard once again the Angels singing to the shepherds of “good news of great joy for all the people” (Lk 2:10). And what is this good news, this Gospel, that has made countless lives joyful and given hope to people for two thousand years? It is simply this as foretold by the Prophet Isaiah: “a child has been born *for* us, a son given *to* us.” Everything he will be and do is “for us.” As our decorations, lights, gift-giving, volunteering, generosity, and festive meals testify, Jesus’ Birth is still celebrated with gladness.

For those who know the reason, this joy is because “we who walked in darkness have seen a great light; . . . on us a light has shone” (cf. Is 9:2). And that light is the “light of the world” (Jn 8:12). The light of that first Christmas was like a fire blazing in the night. All about there was darkness, while in the cave shone the true light “that enlightens every man” (Jn 1:9). “It was precisely there [in Bethlehem] that the revolutionary spark of God’s love was kindled.”<sup>1</sup> The Child born of Mary is truly the light whose appearance breaks through the gloom of

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, Homily at Midnight Mass (25 December 2017).

world events, dispels the darkness of our heavy hearts and enables us to grasp the meaning of our own lives and of all history.<sup>2</sup>

When we look at the Nativity scene, whether here at the Cathedral, at home, or perhaps just on a Christmas card, our eyes are inevitably drawn to the two principal figures, the newborn Infant and his Mother. But let's not forget the setting. Where did all this take place? Is there any significance in Jesus' Birth in Bethlehem and in a manger?

To share the good news of the Nativity, I would like to point out just a few details of this marvellous Gospel account, details which, I hope, will lead to a deeper understanding of the awesome wonder of Christmas, when "the grace of God [has] appeared, bringing salvation to all" (Tit 2:11).

### ***Bethlehem: Space for God***

Luke the Evangelist was a scrupulous historian. He tells us that Caesar Augustus called for a census of the Empire, no doubt so that he could collect ever more taxes from his subjects. Every head of a family was to return to his ancestral town. Joseph obeyed, and because he was of the royal house of David, he set out with Mary, even though her pregnancy was well advanced, to be registered in Bethlehem. This city of David, the prophets had written, would be the Messiah's birthplace.

But Bethlehem proved to be inhospitable. Joseph couldn't find any

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Urbi et Orbi* Message (25 December 2008).

shelter. For the Saviour of the world, for the One in whom and for whom all things were created (cf. Col 1:16), no empty room could be found. Even before his Birth, and with a ferocity that only increased with time, Jesus was unwelcome (cf. Jn 1:11).

Even if we are waiting for God to draw near to our lives, when the moment comes, so often we have no room for him. We are so preoccupied with ourselves that no time or consideration remains for others. Do we have time for our neighbour who needs a kind word or a willing ear? For someone suffering who looks to us for help? For the refugee or migrant worker seeking assistance? Do we have time and space for God? Do we welcome him into our lives? Or have we occupied all the available space in our thoughts, our actions, and our lives for ourselves?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily at Midnight Mass (25 December 2007).

Fortunately for Joseph and Mary, in the area around Bethlehem, rocky caves had been used as stables since ancient times. They were able to take shelter in one of them, which provided the space for the sacred event of Jesus' Birth.<sup>4</sup> In this cave-stable, "Heaven came down to Earth."<sup>5</sup>

### ***Manger, Animals and a Saviour***

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son . . . and laid him in a manger" (Lk 2:7). What is the significance of the Child being laid in a feeding trough? In one of his homilies, St. Augustine explained this. "The manger is the place where animals find their food. But now, lying in the manger is he who called himself the true bread come down from heaven, the true nourishment that we need in order to be fully ourselves. This is the food that gives us true life, eternal life. Thus – he wrote – the manger becomes a reference to the table of God, to which we are invited so as to receive the bread of God."<sup>6</sup> The manger was a symbol of the altar, on which lies the Bread which is Christ himself: the true food for our hearts.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 3, *The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Image Books, 2012), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily at Midnight Mass (25 December 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 3, *The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Image Books, 2012), 68.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily at Midnight Mass (25 December 2006).

In this way Jesus seems to tell us that he is born as bread, as food for us; he enters life to give us his life. He does not come into our world to overwhelm us with his power but to serve us with his love. We can also see here a thread which joins the manger to the cross, where Jesus will become bread that is broken for our salvation. – born for us a Saviour<sup>8</sup>

Even if Scripture does not mention the two animals beside the manger, it is a very ancient tradition and gained widespread recognition after St. Francis made the first living manger scene in Greccio more than 800 years ago. The ox and the ass were interpreted as symbolizing the Jews and the pagans – that is, all of humanity –, since everyone and every people and nation have need of a Saviour.<sup>9</sup>

But do we still really believe that we need a “Saviour”? Is a “Saviour” still needed by a humanity which has reached the moon and is ready to conquer the universe? By a humanity which has succeeded in deciphering the marvellous codes of the human genome? Is a Saviour needed by a humanity which navigates the Internet and has made the Earth, our common home, a global village?

Yes. Despite our triumphs, we need to be saved. Even here in our City homelessness abounds and human trafficking robs countless women

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Francis, Homily at Midnight Mass (25 December 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily at Midnight Mass (25 December 2006).

and children of their dignity. Others are victims of racial discrimination and religious intolerance, and by political interference and moral coercion with regard to the free exercise of their conscience or religion. And what of those who are trapped in loneliness and who often end up enslaved to alcohol or drugs? And those who choose death in the belief that they are celebrating life?

People are seeking, sometimes unconsciously, the coming of a Saviour who will reverse the suffering and evil in the world. It is awaiting Christ, the one true Saviour who has come to us and remains with us as Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Let me conclude by reading you from Pope Francis's Christmas homily last year. He sums up everything I have been trying to say:

With this sign [the Child lying in the manger] the Gospel reveals a paradox: it speaks of the emperor, the governor, the mighty of those times, but God does not make himself present there; he does not appear in the grand hall of a royal palace, but in the poverty of a stable; not in pomp and show, but in the simplicity of life; not in power, but in a smallness which surprises. In order to discover him, we need to go there, where he is: we need to bow down, humble ourselves, make ourselves small. The Child who is born challenges us: he calls us to leave behind fleeting illusions and go to the heart of

things . . . to rediscover in the simplicity of the God-child,  
peace, joy and the meaning of life.<sup>10</sup>

### *Conclusion*

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<sup>10</sup> Francis, Homily at Midnight Mass (25 December 2016).

Dear brothers and sisters: long ago, in the little town of Bethlehem, the Saviour was born, becoming our companion along the precarious path of our life. Wherever we are on that journey, be it near or far, let us take the hand which he stretches out to us: it is a hand which seeks to take nothing from us, but only to give us his love.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Urbi et Orbi* Message (25 December 2005).