

TODAY A SAVIOUR IS BORN FOR US

Christmas Eve
December 24, 1977

Isaiah 9:1-6
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14

...Juan Antonio Gutiérrez¹, I thank you, those listening on the radio, for this unexpected showing of solidarity on my return from a foreign trip; I feel this applause shows a Church more and more united so as to witness in the world that mercy and salvation we are celebrating on this holy night.

In the readings that we have just heard I find three ideas that will form my Christmas message: 1) the apostle, Paul and Saint Luke, the evangelist, speak about Mary and say: *the time came for her to have her child* (a) to gather together from the three readings the wonderful descriptions or clarifications that are made about this child who is born in Bethlehem; 3) to consider the call that the Word of God makes to each one of us as collaborators in this plan that God has commanded his Son to bring to realization.

The time came

First of all, I want to explain the reason for this Christmas happiness. It seems as though tonight, December 24th, 1977, the angels sing for the first time over our people: *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests* (b). It also seems as though people listen for the first time with surprise to the Good News that the angels proclaimed in Bethlehem: *I proclaim to you good news of great joy ... a Savior has been born for you* (c). My sisters and brothers this is the solemn hour when the Evangelist refers to Mary and says: *the time came for her to have her child* (d) --- not only the hour that arrives for each woman when she gives birth to her child, but this is a decisive hour. For this Son that will come forth from the virginal womb of Mary marks a most solemn moment and from this time on, history is divided into the history before Christ and the history after Christ.

Before Christ everything was hope and promise and prophecy. When people saw Jesus among them, they asked: *Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?* (e). This was the hope of the ancient prophets and patriarchs that today is fulfilled in the child who is born. Now from the perspective of Bethlehem all of that hope that has come to be fulfilled in the fullness of time and according to the plans of God can no longer be lived apart from Christ. From this moment on we can use the words of the Second Vatican Council and call Jesus *the Lord of history* (f), even the history that occurred before the time of Christ. No one who had been born of a woman, except Christ, our Lord, could have been spoken about in such a profound way before he was born. What distinguishes this hour of Christ? It is distinguished by the great ideal that God has for humanity: *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests* (g). This does not mean that God waits for the benevolence of men and women to provide a motive for him to act in favor of humanity.

For we know that we have been greatly loved, because even while we were sinners and had turned our backs to God, yet God loved us and had designed a plan for us as sinners --- a plan that the prophet Isaiah has described tonight as a kingdom that will be established by this child, a kingdom forever peaceful, a kingdom that is confirmed and sustained by justice and judgment, a kingdom that will endure forever (h). In Saint Paul's letter to Titus he says that Christ has come to form a people purified of their sins, a people who will be his glory in time and in eternity (i).

My sisters and brothers, with Christ, God has inserted himself into history. With the birth of Christ the Kingdom of God is inaugurated in our time. For twenty centuries now, on this night we remember that the Kingdom of God is present in the world and that Christ inaugurated the fullness of time. His birth signifies that God walks with us through history, that we are not alone on our journey and that he is our inspiration for peace and justice and a kingdom of divine judgment, of something holy and distinct from the realities of the earth. We can hope for all of this not because we are able to make real this beatitude that is proclaimed by the sacred words of Scripture but because Jesus, the architect of the kingdom of justice and love and peace, is in the midst of humanity.

We are in the fullness of time. The time of the first coming of Christ until his second coming is referred to as the Christian era. Saint Paul tells us (j) that there is great joy among those who celebrate the Nativity of Christ and recall to mind the happiness of those who awaited Christ twenty centuries ago, then they should have even greater joy and hope that Jesus will return to crown the fullness of time and gather unto himself all the work of his Church, the good will of Christian men and women, and all that has been sown through the suffering and pain of so many people. He will gather us together in the definitive Kingdom that he must (in his time) bring to fulfillment. The kingdom of justice and peace will come. Therefore do not become discouraged even when the horizons of history seem to become darkened and closed, or when it seems that the human reality makes it impossible for the plan of God to be accomplished. God even makes use of human mistakes and the sins of people so that there will arise in the darkness that which Isaiah spoke about in the first reading when he said: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwell in the land of gloom a light has shown* (k).

On this holy night, the light that shined so brilliantly in Bethlehem is a sign of our hope. Let us not be discouraged when our hope is tried and put to the test. Let us hope against all hope and hold fast to that hope in the fullness of time. Let us live the ideals that God has realized and accomplished. Christmas is a message of optimism that I want to engrave deeply in the hearts of every Christian so that, as the divine Word tells us tonight, we all might realize that this is the beginning of the Kingdom of God that is awaited with such surety.

A saviour has been born to you: the Messiah, the Lord

Why do I say this? This is my second point: we, men and women, are not going to make this kingdom come about, this kingdom that Christ is building. We have heard the beautiful description of Isaiah when he refers to the person of Christ, our Lord. *A child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulders dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice* (l).

These words recount the events that surrounded the anointing of each of David's successors to the throne that God had promised to maintain. These words of Isaiah were pronounced as a ritual to remind the person who was anointed to sit on the throne of David of this prophecy and not that he, the individual king, was going to realize this plan of God. All the kings of the Davidic dynasty had an ideal that was accomplished not by mere human beings but by the One who was both God and man, Emmanuel, God-with-us. (m) Thus all the kings of Israel and Judah realized that they were very limited, sinful, and imperfect and that no ruler could fulfill the whole of God's plan. The Church and the Kingdom of God would be given the responsibility to criticize and analyze and bring people to an awareness that the kingdoms of this world still lack justice and peace and effectiveness. Only when the true king, Christ, the One who was announced by God becomes the king of everyone's heart, only then will we have the reign that God had planned. The ideal king never appeared on the throne of David until that night when the angels were able to sing the words of the prophet: *For a child is born to us, a son is given to us and upon his shoulders is the reign of peace and justice and love.*

Only Christ can bring about this kingdom of peace and justice and love. Thus we heard in the second reading where Saint Paul defines this Christ, this Christmas as the glorious appearance of the great God and our Savior: Jesus Christ. My sisters and brothers, on this night let us draw near to the manger that is not simply the manger of a child but the manger of the Child-God. Before this manger, the words of Saint Paul should enlighten our faith and lead us to the profession of his divinity: *It is the great God and our Savior who is born: Jesus Christ.* We also see that in the gospel, when the angels announced to the shepherds the birth of the child in Bethlehem, they describe him in the following way: *For today in the city of David a savior has been born who is Messiah and Lord* (o). Notice the three beautiful names: *Savior, Lord, Messiah.* To utter the word *Lord* at the time in which the gospel was written was to direct a challenge to the idols of the earth. For the Christian there is only one Lord who has been born today and whom we adore, one Lord before whom we fall on our knees for there is no other god of history or time. Christ is the Lord! Christ is the Messiah! Christ is the Savior!

1. What God expects of men and women

Finally, my sisters and brothers, while this is God's plan and while his own Son is the one who realizes this plan, yet God does not want to do this alone. The third thought of my Christmas message is an attempt to deduce from the Divine Word God's expectations of us. Many times God encounters opposition and contempt. Here in the reading from Isaiah we discover that the clouds that covered those regions in darkness were the result of the abuse and outrages committed by the people of that time. But the prophet proclaimed: *For the yoke that oppressed them, the pole on their shoulder, and the rod of their taskmaster you have smashed, as on the day of Midian. For every boot that tramped in battle, every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for flames* (p). The triumph of rudeness and evil men and women will not prevail. Here the prophet tells us that those who are opposed to the Kingdom of God will also be instruments who reveal the splendor of the glory of God. All those opposed to the Kingdom of God will become fuel for the fire.

We discover in the New Testament readings, the reading from the gospel and Saint Paul, how even people who ignored Christ became instruments of his Kingdom. Listen to the beginning of today's gospel: *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the*

whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment when Quirinius was governor of Syria (q). The government officials and leaders of the world are God's instruments. Who was going to tell the ruler of the Roman Empire that his greatness would end here, on bended knee before the child Jesus in the manger? Who would tell the Emperor Caesar Augustus that his order to participate in the census would be obeyed by Joseph and Mary in Nazareth so that Christ could fulfill the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? People, without being aware of it, become God's instruments.

When people do not oppose or ignore God but consciously become God's instruments then they are like Mary and Joseph and the apostle Paul and the Church. We are the Church because through Baptism we have been incorporated in this holy people that Christ has formed in order to be present in every moment of history. We must write in our hearts the watchwords that Saint Paul presents to us today. (r) God brings us salvation and he teaches us to put aside our irreligious life and our earthly desires and to live frugal and honest lives, lives filled with hope.

My sisters and brothers, God is calling us tonight. How I would love to draw near to each one of your hearts and ask you: *On this holy night, to which group do you belong? Are you part of that group that is opposed to God and sows darkness on the earth? Are you part of that group that does not know Christ and without knowing it are an instrument of the Kingdom, like the Emperor and other distinguished persons during the time of Jesus? Hopefully you are part of this third group who like the Virgin and the shepherds are obedient and hear the Lord's call!* Tonight, we as Christians are aware of the fact that Christ was not only born twenty centuries ago. Christ is born again today in the midst of our people and in our hearts. To the degree that every Christian tries to live the gospel in their lives and the commands of the true Church of God with integrity, then each one of us is like the apostle, like Mary, and like the shepherds who give glory to God and sing with joy because they have come to know Christ. When we have known the Lord, we must, like the shepherds at Bethlehem, bring this news to others. Therefore, a sincere conversion toward God is necessary --- we must convert ourselves into the love that has visited us and echo the infinite goodness of God who brought us redemption. Let us not reject this gift of redemption nor live in the darkness! May we open our hearts so that tonight Christ can be born there! Then our hearts will be filled with light and we will be able to sing with the angels the news that we must bring to all people, to our whole society, and to our nation: *today a savor has been born for you!* (s). My sisters and brothers, in light of this message and supported by the divine Word of God's glory and God's gift of peace to humanity, I want to say to you: Merry Christmas.

Let us now proclaim in a special way our Creed.

¹ The greeting and opening words of the homily are not recorded on the tape.

Margin References (a) Lk 2,6: (b) Lk 2,14: (c) Lk 2,10-11: (d) Lk 2,6: (e) Lk 7,19: (f) GS 41: (g) Lk 2,14: (h) Is 9,6: (i) Tt 2,14: (j) Tt 2,13: (k) Is 9,1: (l) Is 9,5-6: (m) Is 7,14: (n) Tt 2,13: (o) Lk 2,11: (p) Is 9,3-4: (q) Lk 2,1-2: (r) Tt 2,12-13: (s) Lk 2,11.