

## MIDNIGHT MASS

### SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD

### *HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI*

*Saint Peter's Basilica 24 December 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters!*

The reading from Saint Paul's Letter to Titus that we have just heard begins solemnly with the word "*apparuit*", which then comes back again in the reading at the Dawn Mass: *apparuit* – "there has appeared". This is a programmatic word, by which the Church seeks to express synthetically the essence of Christmas. Formerly, people had spoken of God and formed human images of him in all sorts of different ways. God himself had spoken in many and various ways to mankind (cf. *Heb* 1:1 – Mass during the Day). But now something new has happened: he has appeared. He has revealed himself. He has emerged from the inaccessible light in which he dwells. He himself has come into our midst. This was the great joy of Christmas for the early Church: God has appeared. No longer is he merely an idea, no longer do we have to form a picture of him on the basis of mere words. He has "appeared". But now we ask: how has he appeared? Who is he in reality? The reading at the Dawn Mass goes on to say: "the kindness and love of God our Saviour for mankind were revealed" (*Tit* 3:4). For the people of pre-Christian times, whose response to the terrors and contradictions of the world was to fear that God himself might not be good either, that he too might well be cruel and arbitrary, this was a real "epiphany", the great light that has appeared to us: God is pure goodness. Today too, people who are no longer able to recognize God through faith are asking whether the ultimate power that underpins and sustains the world is truly good, or whether evil is just as powerful and primordial as the good and the beautiful which we encounter in radiant moments in our world. "The kindness and love of God our Saviour for mankind were revealed": this is the new, consoling certainty that is granted to us at Christmas.

In all three Christmas Masses, the liturgy quotes a passage from the Prophet Isaiah, which describes the epiphany that took place at Christmas in greater detail: "A child is born for us, a son given to us and dominion is laid on his shoulders; and this is the name they give him: Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God, Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace. Wide is his dominion in a peace that has no end" (*Is* 9:5f.). Whether the prophet had a particular child in mind, born during his own period of history, we do not know. But it seems impossible. This is the only text in the Old Testament in which it is said of a child, of a human being: his name will be Mighty-God, Eternal-Father. We are presented with a vision that extends far beyond the historical moment into the mysterious, into the future. A child, in all its weakness, is Mighty God. A child, in all its neediness and dependence, is Eternal Father. And his peace "has no end". The prophet had previously described the child as "a great light" and had said of the peace he would usher in that the

rod of the oppressor, the footgear of battle, every cloak rolled in blood would be burned (*Is* 9:1, 3-4).

God has appeared – as a child. It is in this guise that he pits himself against all violence and brings a message that is peace. At this hour, when the world is continually threatened by violence in so many places and in so many different ways, when over and over again there are oppressors’ rods and bloodstained cloaks, we cry out to the Lord: O mighty God, you have appeared as a child and you have revealed yourself to us as the One who loves us, the One through whom love will triumph. And you have shown us that we must be peacemakers with you. We love your childish estate, your powerlessness, but we suffer from the continuing presence of violence in the world, and so we also ask you: manifest your power, O God. In this time of ours, in this world of ours, cause the oppressors’ rods, the cloaks rolled in blood and the footgear of battle to be burned, so that your peace may triumph in this world of ours.

Christmas is an epiphany – the appearing of God and of his great light in a child that is born for us. Born in a stable in Bethlehem, not in the palaces of kings. In 1223, when Saint Francis of Assisi celebrated Christmas in Greccio with an ox and an ass and a manger full of hay, a new dimension of the mystery of Christmas came to light. Saint Francis of Assisi called Christmas “the feast of feasts” – above all other feasts – and he celebrated it with “unutterable devotion” (2 *Celano* 199; *Fonti Francescane*, 787). He kissed images of the Christ-child with great devotion and he stammered tender words such as children say, so Thomas of Celano tells us (*ibid.*). For the early Church, the feast of feasts was Easter: in the Resurrection Christ had flung open the doors of death and in so doing had radically changed the world: he had made a place for man in God himself. Now, Francis neither changed nor intended to change this objective order of precedence among the feasts, the inner structure of the faith centred on the Paschal Mystery. And yet through him and the character of his faith, something new took place: Francis discovered Jesus’ humanity in an entirely new depth. This human existence of God became most visible to him at the moment when God’s Son, born of the Virgin Mary, was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. The Resurrection presupposes the Incarnation. For God’s Son to take the form of a child, a truly human child, made a profound impression on the heart of the Saint of Assisi, transforming faith into love. “The kindness and love of God our Saviour for mankind were revealed” – this phrase of Saint Paul now acquired an entirely new depth. In the child born in the stable at Bethlehem, we can as it were touch and caress God. And so the liturgical year acquired a second focus in a feast that is above all a feast of the heart.

This has nothing to do with sentimentality. It is right here, in this new experience of the reality of Jesus’ humanity that the great mystery of faith is revealed. Francis loved the child Jesus, because for him it was in this childish estate that God’s humility shone forth. God became poor. His Son was born in the poverty of the stable. In the child Jesus, God made himself dependent, in need of human love, he put himself in the position of asking for human love – our love. Today Christmas has become a commercial celebration, whose bright lights hide the mystery of God’s humility, which in turn calls us to humility and simplicity. Let us ask the Lord to help us see through the superficial

glitter of this season, and to discover behind it the child in the stable in Bethlehem, so as to find true joy and true light.

Francis arranged for Mass to be celebrated on the manger that stood between the ox and the ass (cf. *I Celano* 85; *Fonti* 469). Later, an altar was built over this manger, so that where animals had once fed on hay, men could now receive the flesh of the spotless lamb Jesus Christ, for the salvation of soul and body, as Thomas of Celano tells us (cf. *I Celano* 87; *Fonti* 471). Francis himself, as a deacon, had sung the Christmas Gospel on the holy night in Greccio with resounding voice. Through the friars' radiant Christmas singing, the whole celebration seemed to be a great outburst of joy (*I Celano* 85.86; *Fonti* 469, 470). It was the encounter with God's humility that caused this joy – his goodness creates the true feast.

Today, anyone wishing to enter the Church of Jesus' Nativity in Bethlehem will find that the doorway five and a half metres high, through which emperors and caliphs used to enter the building, is now largely walled up. Only a low opening of one and a half metres has remained. The intention was probably to provide the church with better protection from attack, but above all to prevent people from entering God's house on horseback. Anyone wishing to enter the place of Jesus' birth has to bend down. It seems to me that a deeper truth is revealed here, which should touch our hearts on this holy night: if we want to find the God who appeared as a child, then we must dismount from the high horse of our "enlightened" reason. We must set aside our false certainties, our intellectual pride, which prevents us from recognizing God's closeness. We must follow the interior path of Saint Francis – the path leading to that ultimate outward and inward simplicity which enables the heart to see. We must bend down, spiritually we must as it were go on foot, in order to pass through the portal of faith and encounter the God who is so different from our prejudices and opinions – the God who conceals himself in the humility of a newborn baby. In this spirit let us celebrate the liturgy of the holy night, let us strip away our fixation on what is material, on what can be measured and grasped. Let us allow ourselves to be made simple by the God who reveals himself to the simple of heart. And let us also pray especially at this hour for all who have to celebrate Christmas in poverty, in suffering, as migrants, that a ray of God's kindness may shine upon them, that they – and we – may be touched by the kindness that God chose to bring into the world through the birth of his Son in a stable. Amen.