

The Light of Christmas to Dispel the Darkness All Year

Christmas continues to be a time of joy and festivity in our world, but it is experienced quite differently by Christians. In the marketplace and our busy western society we could say that Christmas begins with the joy of anticipation kicked off by the shopping season that starts right after Hallowe'en. For Americans it kicks off with Thanksgiving weekend.

For Christians the joy of anticipation isn't focused on shopping but on looking ahead to the significance of Christmas as the Nativity of Jesus Christ. The season of anticipation is called Advent and it kicks off the fourth Sunday before Christmas. Each of the four Sundays begins one of the four weeks of Advent, with the fourth week varying considerably in length from a full week to just a day or two, depending on where Christmas or December 25th falls in the month of December from year to year.

One of the beautiful characteristics of Christmas, for Christians as well as for those less attached to the Person of Jesus Christ, is the long and ever evolving tradition of gift giving. From the Magi to Saint Nicholas (Sinter Klaas in Dutch), or Santa Claus in America, people find a deep variety of meaning in the giving of gifts to relatives, friends, coworkers, and in a particular way, to the poor. For most of society in general, though, Christmas is over the day after, on Boxing Day, which has become another shopping highlight. For Christians, however, there is a Christmas season which echoes the Advent season.

In the renewed Liturgical calendar of the Roman Catholic Church, the Christmas season runs from Christmas Eve for about two weeks until the Solemnity of the Baptism of the Lord, which usually falls around January 10th, give or take a few days. Highlights of the Christmas season include other solemnities: the Feast of the Holy Family which is usually the Sunday after Christmas; the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God which coincides with New Year's Eve and Day; the Solemnity of Epiphany which is either January 6th or the Sunday after; and the Solemnity of the Baptism of the Lord which is usually the next Sunday except when it would be too late, like January 13th or 14th.

Echoes of Christmas linger in the liturgical calendar until February 2nd, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple. It usually falls on a weekday; such that most people do not get to celebrate it in church, except when it falls on a Sunday. The feast maintains from the old liturgical calendar a link with Christmas, lighting candles for a procession to the Manger scene which is kept in the church long after the Christmas decorations are put away. This day highlights and emphasizes the light God sent into the world in the Person of his divine Son, a light which became manifest at the Nativity of Jesus, when through the poor shepherds He began to draw all people to Himself and, through Him, to the Father.

These 40 days after Christmas pass very quickly and usher in the Presentation of the Lord and acclaim Jesus as our light – the Light of God in the world. On this day, as on every day, the Father is calling us to put all our trust in Him through his Son Jesus. But it's not easy to trust when we find ourselves in a deep darkness, and we are in deep darkness right now – much as the people were in Isaiah's day. We can experience darkness around family life – when we see all the suffering of married couples and families we know. We are concerned that the world is shrouded in the darkness of death and destruction caused by so many wars, social and economic disturbances, and worst of all: terrorism and natural disasters. In the face of all that, it is difficult to put our trust in someone we cannot see with our eyes, our God; especially when God is ridiculed, doubted, used for profit or simply ignored by our culture, business world, personalities and society as a whole. It is difficult to trust God as our loving Father.

However, now as then, we who walk in darkness really have seen a great light – Jesus, light of God in the world. The Scriptures make it clear that our Father wants us to meet Jesus every week; so He gives us 6 days to do all we want and need to do. He reserves the 7th day and commands us to keep it holy by honouring

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Him each week in our Sunday worship, playing, and spending the day with family and friends. When we give in to the fear of not getting everything done, we end up needing 8, 9, or even 10 days a week – we can so easily become slaves – with all the misery of slavery. We can be confused by the overabundance of good things – we don't know how to choose well. That's why our Father asks us to put our trust in Him. If we give Him the 7th day, He will infuse his order into our other 6 days. We won't drown in the sea of good things, but will receive divine light to help us choose the best things. That is why we come to his holy Temple – the place where He meets his people – the church. Here we listen to his Word, receive his guidance, offer Him our gifts, and open ourselves to receive Him in person in Holy Communion.

This seems simple enough, but we have trouble getting here or even deciding to come, because of life's difficulties and because of the wrong impressions we have received from others. The Apostle Paul says that it is precisely because we are still sinners that daily life crucifies us – it nails us down in pain – and surprisingly it is in that very suffering that we discover the Cross of Christ. As we turn to Jesus in the reality of what He suffered on the Cross, He exerts his power to begin putting right what was wrong in our life. The more we accept to trust Him, the more like Him we become.

Jesus continues to say to us: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Heaven is contained in Jesus Himself, and He has come near to us. He has come to begin God's reign on the earth. Countless women, men, youth and children since the time of the Apostles have had the great joy and excitement of experiencing God's reign for themselves. In Jesus, the love and power of God to heal and give eternal life are fully activated for anyone to receive. Jesus is the One most worthy of our trust – He will never disappoint.

Something very mysterious happens when people all focus together on Jesus. By looking to Jesus, we stop being preoccupied with ourselves and by looking in the same direction, we allow the Holy Spirit to weave us together into one cohesive unit, one living body working together with its many parts. However, as we all know, it's not an easy thing to keep our focus on Jesus. We hesitate to really put all our trust in Him, for various reasons, but it's the only way. Jesus has established in Himself and around Himself the reign of God on earth. As we recognize Jesus' authority over us, we begin to taste the goodness of God's reign – we see and enjoy the peace He gives, the unity He creates among us, the fruits of love that grow in our lives.

So if this is such good news, why is it so hard to put God first? We could call it a contest of wills: our will struggles to have its way and we hesitate or refuse to let God have his way. To trust or not to trust, that is the question. Once we can trust, then we are glad to obey and enjoy the fruits that come from obedience. We can understand this in a different way by looking at Jesus' own words: He is a master fisherman recruiting others to work with Him. He is fishing for men, women, youth and children. Jesus is fishing for us. His nets are his teaching – the Gospels and the Scriptures, the Sacraments, and the Church. His fishermen are the Apostles and evangelists, teachers and preachers, priests, parents, catechists, religious sisters and brothers, and ordinary Christians. His community begins with the family, however rich or poor, large or small it may be.

The kingdom of God is a family of families, a community of communities, which is a reflection on Earth of the community, the family, of the Holy Trinity. God is a divine being consisting of three divine persons in an intimate communion of life and love, and the family has been designed by God as a living reflection on Earth of the life, love, and beatitude of Heaven. Jesus calls us to follow Him as his disciples. He forms us and sends us out into the world to proclaim his good news and to make more disciples, who in turn will get to know Him, be formed by Him, and be sent out by Him into the world to make even more disciples. This is God's plan for the renewal of the Earth and the transformation of humanity. We are privileged and blessed to live and labor in the vineyard of the Kingdom of God as disciples of Jesus and as good stewards of all the good things the Creator has put on the Earth for the benefit of all of humanity in harmony with all of creation.