

## Christmas Eve 2018

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, the prophet said; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing. Tonight the whole earth is filled with light and joy, for a child is born to us, a son is given us. They name him Wonder-Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. The long awaited Messiah has come, and the radiance of his glory scatters the darkness and fills this night with holy light.*

All over the world people on earth join the angels in heaven in singing *glory to God* in glad carols. Everywhere there is joyful celebration of God's Son come to earth to set us free. He has *smashed the yoke* of sin and death that burdened us, as Isaiah proclaimed. He is the *Prince of Peace* who brings all who acknowledge and worship him under *his dominion which is vast and forever peaceful*; and he leads all who follow him as Lord into *his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever.*

God's own life has come down from heaven to bring us the promise of life and happiness without end. Tonight we can all rejoice, young and old, saint and sinner: As St. Paul assures us: *The grace of God has appeared saving us all.* No one is excluded; tonight we all receive the offer of forgiveness and new life. Christmas marks a new beginning for the human race because God has come to us in human form.

*Don't be afraid; the angel said to the shepherds; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy for all the people. For today a savior is born for you, Christ the Lord.* God's own Son was willing to be born a weak and helpless babe to help us in our weakness with God's almighty power. God loves you so much, each of you personally and individually, that he sent us his only-begotten Son to reunite us sinners to God and his love. Jesus knows our hopes and fears, our tears and dreams because he became just like us in every way except sin. He shared our human life with all its joys and struggles so that we could share his divine life. The Son of God became human so that we humans can become sons and daughters of God.

Tonight we don't just celebrate Jesus' birth, we celebrate our own birth as well. In baptism, God gives us new birth as his children, as St. Paul proclaims: *Jesus Christ gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people as his own.* destined to live with him in unending bliss and heavenly glory, if only we stay united with him on earth.

And so every year in the coldest and darkest days of winter, we celebrate this feast to remind ourselves that no matter what happens we don't have to be afraid. We have a cause for joy that is stronger than death itself: God has loved us and given us a whole new life as his children, called to imitate his love and goodness. He has empowered us to work with him to heal the wounds of sin and division, to use His grace and blessings to fill our world with the peace and joy the angels announced that first Christmas night.

Yes, we celebrate this feast in order to remind ourselves of our new identity in Christ, and to strengthen one another *to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live justly and devoutly in this world.* In other words never to go back to the darkness of sin now that Jesus has come and filled us with God's life, but to always live in the light of this holy night, in the goodness and mercy that has come to us. Let's never go back to selfishness and greed, but live always in the Christmas spirit of generosity and caring, of love and self-giving.

And to help us do that God renews for us now the miracle of Christmas. At the message of an angel the virgin Mary offered herself to God and by the power of the Holy Spirit Christ took human flesh and blood from her body. In just a few moments we will offer God our bread and wine and, by the power of the same Holy Spirit, Christ our Lord will change them into his body and blood, taking flesh upon the altar. Like Mary we will hold in our hands and receive into ourselves the very Son of God: no longer a helpless baby but now the almighty Lord and Savior of the world, who comes to be with us always and to remind us that by his birth he has given us rebirth as God's beloved sons and daughters.

As we offer this Christ-mass together, let's pray that we never forget the gift of God's love which we celebrate and **receive** tonight. Let us offer him the gift he most wants in return: that we should give ourselves to him in love as generously and completely as he has given himself to us. If we do, then the joy and peace of Christmas will fill our hearts and our lives each and every day of the year.