

CHRISTMAS – 2021

What a joy it is to be with all of you to celebrate once again the birth of Jesus into our world! This feast is all about the greatest gift that we and the whole human race have ever been given: the gift of God the Son who took on our human condition in order to be our Savior. A special welcome to all of you who are from out of town and here with family; it's really a blessing for us that you are with us.

We look forward to Christmas every year, and for a variety of reasons. The youngsters can't wait to dig into that pile of presents under the tree; parents and grandparents look forward to the family gatherings; we all enjoy gift exchanges and other gatherings with friends, co-workers and others. We also know, however, that Christmas can be a difficult and sad time. Maybe you had to endure the death of a spouse or parent or child or other loved one this year, and this is your first Christmas without that loved one. Maybe you are struggling with serious financial issues, or are battling a serious illness or disease, or a loved one is dealing with COVID. Or maybe you are genuinely and legitimately concerned about the divisions and violence that seem to keep growing all over the place. What does "Merry Christmas" mean in such circumstances? It may not feel at all like those 'Christmas's' we remember from childhood; we may wonder with nostalgia or sadness: "why can't it be like it was back then?"

What is Christmas about? Of course it's about the birth of Jesus. But what do we expect of Christmas? We know that simply remembering the birth of Jesus, in and of itself, won't make everything right and good and happy once again. Maybe we think that God needs to do more to fix all that is broken and to cure us of all that ails us...and he needs to do it right now. Let's remember here that the Savior's coming had been proclaimed by Isaiah and the other prophets for centuries. But his birth that holy night in Bethlehem was noticed only by a handful of people: Mary and Joseph, of course, and a few shepherds who were told the news by an angel. This birth wasn't even the tiniest blip on the radar of the Roman Empire, the strongest power in the world of that time. And Jesus' birth by itself certainly didn't bring an end to sin and evil and injustice in the world then or now; that we know all too well.

But God was working in his perfect wisdom that whole time, during Jesus' infancy and growing-up years into his adulthood, to bring his plan for our salvation to fruition. And what began at Bethlehem led to that Cross on Calvary 33 years later and then to the empty tomb three days after that. The best Christmas card I've ever received makes that point: it has on the front a little baby footprint alongside the angel's word to the shepherds: "Unto you is born this day..."; on the inside of the card are the words "...a Savior, which is Christ the Lord" alongside which is a man's handprint with bloody nail wound right in the middle. In other words, the mystery of Jesus' birth and our very celebration of Christmas itself is meaningless if we don't also remember his death and resurrection.

In its essence, Christmas is all about God working on our behalf, preparing and fulfilling his plan for our sanctification so that we can know the indescribable joy of never-ending love in his immediate and eternal presence. God's work was sometimes done in obscurity as during that "Silent Night" at the manger; other times that divine work was done with great power and glory as at Easter and Pentecost. Christmas reminds us that **God has done his part**. His plan for our

eternal joy has been revealed and set before us in its fullness with Jesus in our world, especially at the manger, the Cross and the empty tomb.

This is the joy of Christmas; it is also the challenge of Christmas. **God has done his part**; now the proverbial ball is in our court and God waits for us to do our part. And what is ‘our part’? At the very least, it is to remember every day of the year (and not just on December 24 or 25) and every day of our lives just what God has already done for us...and then to change our lives to be more in tune with his will for us and his desire for our growth in holiness and love. Christmas in particular and our Christian faith in general remind us of the sobering fact that we all need to pursue the lifelong responsibility of ongoing conversion. They also remind us of the joyful fact that Jesus is what we need and that he gives us what we need to do that. St. Leo I, who served as pope over 1500 years ago, said in a Christmas sermon: “Christian, remember your dignity, and now that you share in God’s own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition.” An absolutely astounding claim: we ‘share in God’s own nature’, and we do—because God the Son has taken on our human nature and body! St. Leo goes on: “Bear in mind who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Do not forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of God’s kingdom.”

That is really so very well said. Christmas in its fullest and deepest sense, its most authentic sense, is remembering this central truth: **God has done his part** in giving us Jesus who is the one and only way, truth and life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him. Bishop Fulton Sheen made the same basic point in saying: “You were made for perfect happiness. That is your purpose. No wonder everything short of God disappoints you.” By the way: that is found in “The Wisdom of Fulton Sheen”, a collection of 366 quotes from his writings—one for every day of the year (including leap year). This book is our cluster gift to you this Christmas; you are welcome to pick up a copy at the church entrance if you haven’t already done so.

I can’t help but return to St. Leo’s words: “Christian, remember your dignity”. Our dignity is grounded in the fact that we, every single one of us, are all beloved children of God, made in his image and likeness, and redeemed by Jesus his Son whose birth we gratefully and joyfully celebrate. If we remember that dignity and act on that dignity, we will in fact know the joy of Christ’s truth and love every day...even beyond this holy night/day. If we remember and act on that dignity, we will know that joy in all circumstances...even in the face of challenges, frustrations, fears or hardships. **God has done his part**; let’s now do our part by remembering every day that important truth and living it out in and for and with Jesus his Son.