

THE PASTOR'S CORNER

SPIRITUAL MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

General Audience of Pope Benedict XVI on 17 December 2008 at Paul VI Audience Hall

Because of the atmosphere that distinguishes it, Christmas is a universal celebration. In fact, even those who do not profess themselves to be believers can perceive in this annual Christian event something extraordinary and transcendent, something intimate that speaks to the heart. It is a Feast that praises the gift of life. The birth of a child must always be an event that brings joy; the embrace of a newborn baby usually inspires feelings of kindness and care, of emotion and tenderness. Christmas is the encounter with a newborn baby lying in a humble grotto...

At Christmas, [however], we do not limit ourselves to commemorating the birth of a great figure: we do not simply and abstractly celebrate the birth of the man or in general the mystery of life; even less do we celebrate only the beginning of the new season. At Christmas we commemorate something very tangible and important for mankind, something essential for the Christian faith, a truth that St. John sums up in these few words: "*The Word became flesh*". This was a historical event that the Evangelist Luke was concerned to situate in a well-defined context: in the days when the decree was issued for the first census of Caesar Augustus, when Quirinius was Governor of Syria (cf. Lk 2:1-7). Therefore, it was on a historically dated night that the event of salvation occurred for which Israel had been waiting for centuries. In the darkness of the night of Bethlehem a great light really was lit: the Creator of the universe became flesh, uniting himself indissolubly with human nature so as truly to be "God from God, Light from Light" yet at the same time a man, true man. What John calls in Greek "*o logos*" translated into Latin as "*Verbum*" ... also means the "Meaning". Thus, we can understand John's words as: the "eternal Meaning" of the world made himself tangible to our senses and our minds: we may now touch him and contemplate him (cf. 1 Jn 1:1). The "Meaning" that became flesh is not merely a general idea inherent in the world; it is a "Word" addressed to us. The *Logos* knows us, calls us, guides us. The Word is not a universal law within which we play some role, but rather a Person who is concerned with every individual person: he is the Son of the living God who became man in Bethlehem.

To many people, and in a certain way to all of us, this seems too beautiful to be true. In fact, here it is reaffirmed to us: yes, a meaning exists, and the meaning is not a

powerless protest against the absurd. The meaning has power: it is God. A good God who must not be confused with any sublime and remote being, whom it would never be possible to reach, but a God who made himself our neighbor and who is very close to us, who has time for each one of us and who came to stay with us. It then comes naturally to ask ourselves: "However could such a thing be possible? Is it dignified for God to make himself a child?". If we are to seek to open our hearts to this truth that illuminates the whole of human existence, we must bend our minds and recognize the limitations of our intelligence. In the Grotto of Bethlehem God shows himself to us as a humble "infant" to defeat our arrogance. Perhaps we would have submitted more easily to power and wisdom, but he does not want us to submit; rather, he appeals to our hearts and to our free decision to accept his love. He made himself tiny to set us free from that human claim to grandeur that results from pride. He became flesh freely in order to set us truly free, free to love him.

Dear brothers and sisters, Christmas is a privileged opportunity to meditate on the meaning and value of our existence. The approach of this Solemnity helps us on the one hand to reflect on the drama of history in which people, injured by sin, are perennially in search of happiness and of a fulfilling sense of life and death; and on the other, it urges us to meditate on the merciful kindness of God who came to man to communicate to him directly the Truth that saves, and to enable him to partake in his friendship and his life. Therefore, let us prepare ourselves for Christmas with humility and simplicity, making ourselves ready to receive as a gift the light, joy, and peace that shine from this mystery. Let us welcome the Nativity of Christ as an event that can renew our lives today. The encounter with the Child Jesus makes us people who do not think only of themselves but open themselves to the expectations and needs of their brothers and sisters. In this way we too will become witnesses of the radiance of Christmas that shines on the humanity of the third millennium. Let us ask Mary Most Holy, Tabernacle of the Incarnate Word, and St Joseph, the silent witness of the events of salvation, to communicate to us what they felt while they were waiting for the Birth of Jesus, so that we may prepare ourselves to celebrate with holiness the approaching Christmas, in the joy of faith and inspired by the commitment to sincere conversion.

Happy Christmas to you all!