



The Holy See

PILGRIMAGE

OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

TO THE HOLY LAND

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Manger's Square - Bethlehem

Wednesday, 13 May 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I thank Almighty God for giving me the grace to come to Bethlehem, not only to venerate the place of Christ's birth, but also to stand beside you, my brothers and sisters in the faith, in these Palestinian Territories. I am grateful to Patriarch Fouad Twal for the sentiments which he has expressed on your behalf, and I greet with affection my brother Bishops and all the priests, religious and lay faithful who labor daily to confirm this local Church in faith, hope and love. In a special way my heart goes out to the pilgrims from war-torn Gaza: I ask you to bring back to your families and your communities my warm embrace, and my sorrow for the loss, the hardship and the suffering you have had to endure. Please be assured of my solidarity with you in the immense work of rebuilding which now lies ahead, and my prayers that the embargo will soon be lifted.

"Do not be afraid; for behold I proclaim to you good news of great joy ... today in the city of David a Savior is born for you" (Lk 2:10-11). The message of Christ's coming, brought from heaven by the voice of angels, continues to echo in this town, just as it echoes in families, homes and communities throughout the world. It is "good news", the angels say "for all the people". It proclaims that the Messiah, the Son of God and the Son of David, has been born "for you": for you and me, and for men and women in every time and place. In God's plan, Bethlehem, "least among the clans of Judah" (Mic 5:2), has become a place of undying glory: the place where, in the fullness of time, God chose to become man, to end the long reign of sin and death, and to bring new and abundant life to a world which had grown old, weary and oppressed by hopelessness.

For men and women everywhere, Bethlehem is associated with this joyful message of rebirth, renewal, light and freedom. Yet here, in our midst, how far this magnificent promise seems from being realized! How distant seems that Kingdom of wide dominion and peace, security, justice and

integrity which the Prophet Isaiah heralded in the first reading (cf. Is 9:7), and which we proclaim as definitively established in the coming of Jesus Christ, Messiah and King!

From the day of his birth, Jesus was “a sign of contradiction” (Lk 2:34), and he continues to be so, even today. The Lord of hosts, “whose origin is from old, from ancient days” (Mic 5:2), wished to inaugurate his Kingdom by being born in this little town, entering our world in the silence and humility of a cave, and lying, a helpless babe, in a manger. Here, in Bethlehem, amid every kind of contradiction, the stones continue to cry out this “good news”, the message of redemption which this city, above all others, is called to proclaim to the world. For here, in a way which surpassed every human hope and expectation, God proved faithful to his promises. In the birth of his Son, he revealed the coming of a Kingdom of love: a divine love which stoops down in order to bring healing and lift us up; a love which is revealed in the humiliation and weakness of the Cross, yet triumphs in a glorious resurrection to new life. Christ brought a Kingdom which is not of this world, yet a Kingdom which is capable of changing this world, for it has the power to change hearts, to enlighten minds and to strengthen wills. By taking on our flesh, with all its weaknesses, and transfiguring it by the power of his Spirit, Jesus has called us to be witnesses of his victory over sin and death. And this is what the message of Bethlehem calls us to be: witnesses of the triumph of God’s love over the hatred, selfishness, fear and resentment which cripple human relationships and create division where brothers should dwell in unity, destruction where men should be building, despair where hope should flourish!

“In hope we were saved”, the Apostle Paul says (Rom 8:24). Yet he affirms with utter realism that creation continues to groan in travail, even as we, who have received the first-fruits of the Spirit, patiently await the fulfilment of our redemption (cf. Rom 8:22-24). In today’s second reading, Paul draws a lesson from the Incarnation which is particularly applicable to the travail which you, God’s chosen ones in Bethlehem, are experiencing: “God’s grace has appeared”, he tells us, “training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires, and to live, temperately, justly and devoutly in this age”, as we await the coming of our blessed hope, the Savior Jesus Christ (Tit 2:11-13).

Are these not the virtues required of men and women who live in hope? First, the constant conversion to Christ which is reflected not only in our actions but also in our reasoning: the courage to abandon fruitless and sterile ways of thinking, acting and reacting. Then, the cultivation of a mindset of peace based on justice, on respect for the rights and duties of all, and commitment to cooperation for the common good. And also perseverance, perseverance in good and in the rejection of evil. Here in Bethlehem, a special perseverance is asked of Christ’s disciples: perseverance in faithful witness to God’s glory revealed here, in the birth of his Son, to the good news of his peace which came down from heaven to dwell upon the earth.

“Do not be afraid!” This is the message which the Successor of Saint Peter wishes to leave with you today, echoing the message of the angels and the charge which our beloved [Pope John Paul II](#) left with you in the year of the Great Jubilee of Christ’s birth. Count on the prayers and solidarity

of your brothers and sisters in the universal Church, and work, with concrete initiatives, to consolidate your presence and to offer new possibilities to those tempted to leave. Be a bridge of dialogue and constructive cooperation in the building of a culture of peace to replace the present stalemate of fear, aggression and frustration. Build up your local Churches, making them workshops of dialogue, tolerance and hope, as well as solidarity and practical charity.

Above all, be witnesses to the power of life, the new life brought by the Risen Christ, the life that can illumine and transform even the darkest and most hopeless of human situations. Your homeland needs not only new economic and community structures, but most importantly, we might say, a new “spiritual” infrastructure, capable of galvanizing the energies of all men and women of good will in the service of education, development and the promotion of the common good. You have the human resources to build the culture of peace and mutual respect which will guarantee a better future for your children. This noble enterprise awaits you. Do not be afraid!

The ancient Basilica of the Nativity, buffeted by the winds of history and the burden of the ages, stands before us as a witness to the faith which endures and triumphs over the world (cf. 1 Jn 5:4). No visitor to Bethlehem can fail to notice that in the course of the centuries the great door leading into the house of God has become progressively smaller. Today let us pray that, by God’s grace and our commitment, the door leading into the mystery of God’s dwelling among men, the temple of our communion in his love, and the foretaste of a world of eternal peace and joy, will open ever more fully to welcome, renew and transform every human heart. In this way, Bethlehem will continue to echo the message entrusted to the shepherds, to us, and to all mankind: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to those whom he loves”! Amen.

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