



The Holy See

JUBILEE PILGRIMAGE
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE HOLY LAND (MARCH 20-26, 2000)

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

MASS IN THE MANGER SQUARE

Palestinian Territories – Bethlehem
Wednesday, 22 March 2000

“To us a Child is born, to us a Son is given. . . and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God. . . Prince of Peace'” (Is 9:6)

Mr. President, thank you for your presence and for that of the other civil authorities.

*Your Beatitude, Brother Bishops and Priests,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. The words of the Prophet Isaiah foreshadow the Saviour’s coming into the world. And it was here in Bethlehem that the great promise was fulfilled. For two thousand years, generation after generation of Christians have pronounced the name of Bethlehem with deep emotion and joyful gratitude. Like the shepherds and the wise men, we too have come to find the Child, “wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger” (*Lk 2:12*). Like so many pilgrims before us, we kneel in wonder and adoration before the ineffable mystery which was accomplished here.

On the first Christmas of my ministry as Successor of the Apostle Peter I mentioned publicly the great desire I had to celebrate the beginning of my Pontificate in Bethlehem at the cave of the Nativity (cf. *Homily at Midnight Mass, 24 December 1978, No. 3*). That was not possible then; and has not been possible until now. But today, how can I fail to praise the God of all mercies, whose

ways are mysterious and whose love knows no end, for bringing me, in this year of the Great Jubilee, to the place of the Saviour's birth? Bethlehem is the heart of my Jubilee Pilgrimage. The paths that I have taken lead me to this place and to the mystery that it proclaims.

I thank Patriarch Michel Sabbah for his kind words of welcome and I cordially embrace all the members of the Assembly of the Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land. Significant is the presence, in the place which saw the birth of the Son of God in the flesh, of many of the Eastern Catholic Communities which form the rich mosaic of our catholicity. With affection in the Lord, I greet the Representatives of the Orthodox Churches and of the Ecclesial Communities present in the Holy Land.

I am grateful to the officials of the Palestinian Authority who are taking part in our celebration and joining us in praying for the well-being of the Palestinian people.

2. "Do not be afraid! Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you: he is Christ the Lord" (*Lk 2:10-11*).

The joy announced by the angel is not a thing of the past. It is a joy of today – the eternal today of God's salvation which embraces all time, past, present and future. At the dawn of the new millennium, we are called to see more clearly that time has meaning because here Eternity entered history and remains with us for ever. The words of the Venerable Bede express the idea clearly: "Still today, and every day until the end of the ages, the Lord will be continually conceived in Nazareth and born in Bethlehem" (*In Ev. S. Lucae, 2: PL 92, 330*). Because it is always Christmas in Bethlehem, every day is Christmas in the hearts of Christians. And every day we are called to proclaim the message of Bethlehem to the world – "good news of great joy": the Eternal Word, "God from God, Light from Light", has become flesh and has made his dwelling among us (cf. *Jn 1:14*).

The newborn Child, defenceless and totally dependent on the care of Mary and Joseph, entrusted to their love, is the world's entire wealth. He is our all!

In this Child – the Son who is given to us – we find rest for our souls and the true bread that never fails – the Eucharistic Bread foreshadowed even in the name of this town: Beth-lehem, the house of bread. God lies hidden in the Child; divinity lies hidden in the Bread of Life. Adoro te devote latens Deitas! Quae sub his figuris vere latitas!

3. The great mystery of divine self-emptying, the work of our redemption unfolding in weakness: this is no easy truth. The Saviour was born in the night – in the darkness, in the silence and poverty of the cave of Bethlehem. "The people who walked in darkness has seen a great light: on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone", declares the Prophet Isaiah (9:2). This is a place that has known "the yoke" and "the rod" of oppression. How often has the cry of

innocents been heard in these streets? Even the great church built over the Saviour's birth-place stands like a fortress battered by the strife of the ages. The Crib of Jesus lies always in the shadow of the Cross. The silence and poverty of the birth in Bethlehem are one with the darkness and pain of the death on Calvary. The Crib and the Cross are the same mystery of redemptive love; the body which Mary laid in the manger is the same body offered up on the Cross.

4. Where then is the dominion of the "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God and Prince of Peace" of which the Prophet Isaiah speaks? What is the power to which Jesus himself refers when he says: "All power has been given to me in heaven and on earth" (*Mt 28:18*)? Christ's kingdom is "not of this world" (*Jn 18:36*). His kingdom is not the play of force and wealth and conquest which appears to shape our human history. It is rather the power to vanquish the Evil One, the ultimate victory over sin and death. It is the power to heal the wounds which disfigure the image of the Creator in his creatures. Christ's is the power to transform our weak nature and make us capable, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, of peace with one another and communion with God himself. "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (*Jn 1:12*). This is the message of Bethlehem today and for ever. This is the extraordinary gift which the Prince of Peace brought into the world two thousand years ago.

5. In that peace, I greet all the Palestinian people, aware as I am that this is an especially important time in your history. I pray that the recently concluded Pastoral Synod in which all the Catholic Churches took part will encourage you and strengthen among you the bonds of unity and peace. In this way you will bear ever more effective witness to the faith, building up the Church and serving the common good. I offer the holy kiss to the Christians of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities. I greet the Muslim Community of Bethlehem and pray for a new era of understanding and cooperation among all the peoples of the Holy Land.

Today we look back to one moment two thousand years ago, but in spirit we embrace all time. We gather in one place, but we encompass the whole earth. We celebrate one newborn Child, but we embrace all men and women everywhere. Today from Manger Square, we cry out to every time and place, and to every person, "Peace be with you! Do not be afraid!" These words resound through the pages of Scripture. They are divine words, spoken by Jesus himself after he rose from the dead: "Do not be afraid!" (*Mt 28:10*). They are the words of the Church to you today. Do not be afraid to preserve your Christian presence and heritage in the very place where the Saviour was born.

In the cave of Bethlehem, to use the words of Saint Paul in today's Second Reading, "God's grace has been revealed" (*Titus 2:11*). In the Child who is born, the world has received "the mercy promised to our fathers, to Abraham and his descendants for ever" (cf. *Lk 1:54-55*). Dazzled by the mystery of the Eternal Word made flesh, we leave all fear behind and we become like the angels, glorifying God who gives the world such gifts. With the heavenly choir, we "sing a new song" (*Ps 96:1*):

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those whom he loves” (*Lk 2:14*).

O Child of Bethlehem, Son of Mary and Son of God, Lord of all time and Prince of Peace, “the same yesterday, today and for ever” (*Heb 13:8*): as we set forth into the new millennium, heal all our wounds, strengthen our steps, open our hearts and minds to “the loving kindness of the heart of our God who visits us like the dawn from on high” (*Lk 1:78*). Amen.

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