

Christmas Night  
(Isaiah 9:1-7 / Luke 2:1-14)  
24.12.2015

On this Christmas night we hear the prophet Isaiah proclaim to God's people a message of great joy. *You have made their gladness greater; You have made their joy increase, they rejoice in Your presence ... They are happy.* This exuberance stems from the revelation of God's merciful love for a people who find themselves plunged in darkness (a symbol of their sin). Joy is given to the people through a fresh shedding of God's light into their lives. This light which shines constitutes nothing less than a new creation for the Lord's Chosen People. Just as all that is came into being with God's command *let there be light*, so all starts anew for despondent Israel with the outpouring of that light of which Isaiah speaks.

As it was for Israel brought home from exile in the time of Isaiah, so it is for us with the coming of God's light in the person of Jesus, who dared to enter into the darkness of our fallen world. The entry of Christ's light into darkness is a grace constantly renewed for us through the continual outpouring of God's gracious mercy into our hearts.

Again and again the light of Christ is given to us to dispel the darkness which we allow to overshadow our lives.

I hear Isaiah's words this night as an encouragement for us to welcome the coming of Christ's light and to see a fresh start for our lives offered to us on this holy night.

Celebrating the Nativity of Jesus we are being invited to welcome our own new birth, remembering that a crucial part of every birthing experience is the new born infant's encounter with the light.

We celebrate this year's Christmas feast in the context for *The Great Year of Mercy*.

I believe we can and should receive this *Great Year of Mercy* as a God-light upon our path to guide us into a place of peace and well-being: a land of freedom.

In the words of Pope Francis: *The manifestation of the Son of God on earth marks the beginning of the great time of mercy. With the birth of Jesus the heavens open! This is the great time of mercy!*

What has been called *the revolution of tenderness*, inaugurated by Pope Francis, has for goal to lift up the downcast and set free the oppressed. It has for goal to deliver all of us from the sadness and slavery of sin's hold upon our lives.

The themes of joy, mercy and freedom, rooted in and stemming from God's love revealed in Christ-Jesus, are clearly very dear to the heart of Pope Francis. He keeps coming back to them. We could resume all his teaching with these words: *God's name is mercy!*

We must remember that, as successor of Peter, he is confided the mission by the Risen Jesus *to confirm the faith of his brothers and sisters.*

This Year is not just an idea of the Pope. I believe we can say that it is a godly initiative: an initiative of God Himself, inspired to Pope Francis for our growth in faith, hope and love.

It is the natural follow-on to what Pope Emeritus Benedict had the Church celebrate a few years ago now in what he called *The Year of Faith*. It is the outcome of his teaching contained in *Deus Caritas Est ~ God is love.*

I see the *Year of Mercy* as perhaps above and before all else a year of hope proposed to the Church. We are being invited to *hope in God's mercy*, as St Benedict likes to put it in his Rule for Monks.

This Year is all about hope in God's *graciousness*, trust in His *steadfast love*, confidence in His faithful *loving kindness*.

During the *Great Year of Mercy* the Bishop of Rome invites us not only to contemplate, but also to reflect the magnanimous love and tender compassion of our God.

A message of great joy rings out in the proclamation of the Nativity heard in Luke's gospel.

The angel declares: *I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people.*

To the voice which speaks this word the whole host of angels blends in with its song of praise. The angelic chorus' song of praise, glorifying God, speaks of His glory being revealed in *God's favour*

shown upon earth.

*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to humankind who enjoy His favour.* (That word *favour* is a very important word in the Bible.)

The *favour* of which the angels sing is **God's mercy!**

The word *favour* figures again in Luke's gospel when Jesus begins His earthly ministry in the Synagogue of Nazareth. Christ begins His preaching precisely by announcing *a time of God's favour* for the people of Israel: a time of mercy and redemption, the occasion for a fresh start in life.

In essence, the Jubilee is all about freedom.

The unfolding of the gospel story shows Jesus fulfil in His person what the great Jubilee Year was for Israel. He comes to deliver His people Israel, He comes to lead God's people forth into freedom. Of course, for Jesus words are never enough. With Jesus there are always accompanying gestures to match the words He speaks. If Jesus came proclaiming a gospel of *freedom for captives, Good News to the poor*, He also operated miracles of healing in favour of those who were sick – not only the physically ill, but sinners in need of the life-restoring grace of forgiveness.

From the first revelation of what could be called *God's mission to the world*, manifested in the exodus event, we are given to see that His will is always to call people out from a place of bondage and oppression into a place of liberty and well-being.

In the gospels we hear Jesus speak of His going up to Jerusalem in terms of an exodus: not only His exodus, but ours also!

The gospels show Jesus leading us into freedom.

Jesus is depicted to be continually freeing people, helping them escape from their own forms of slavery. It is striking that the forms of slavery Jesus freed people from are completely contrasted. Jesus freed people as readily from their illusory self-righteousness as He did from what might be spoken of in terms of inordinate living.

Among the slaveries Jesus denounced, and sought to free people from, were those forms of oppression and injustice they suffered at the hands of others, but which they were also capable of imposing upon their fellow-men and women as well as upon themselves, albeit in other ways. Jesus set out to liberate many of the religious people He encountered from the imprisonment of their narrow mindedness, or again their harsh judgemental assessments both of others and of themselves. Jesus wanted God's people to be free of unhealthy restrictive observances, scrupulous compliance with unimportant religious laws: the small traditions and customs they clung to so slavishly. He could see that many religious people approached the laws and customs of Israel in a way that made of what should have been aids, a help, a hindrance instead. He could see that they had laid up heavy burdens on people's shoulders and exchanged what should have been bonds of love with unjust fetters which held people captive.

If Jesus set out to free some people from reckless living – such as prostitution and moral decadence of all sorts – He also set out to free the so-called virtuous from their prideful convictions of superiority and deluded spiritual grandeur.

While religion is inclined to bind people, God sets them free.

We could say that if Christmas is a message of mercy and joy (and clearly it is!), it is so because it is the revelation of God's freedom: God's freedom to save us in the way He chooses and which is often not how we might expect.

The Messiah who came in the person of Jesus of Nazareth was not a Messiah as the people expected. Indeed, in so many ways, Jesus is the direct opposite to what the People of God expected from the Messiah. *Jesus is the counter-current to the drift of messianic expectations of a triumphant king.*

I have spoken of the importance of gestures to match words with Jesus.

The French Dominican theologian, Yves Congar, a man to whom we are much indebted for the remarkable contribution he made to Vatican II, points out that *the revelation of Jesus is not*

*contained in His teaching alone; it is also, and perhaps we ought to say mainly, in what He did. The coming down of the Word into our flesh, God's acceptance of the status of a servant, the washing of the disciple's feet – all this has the force of a revelation and a revelation of God.*

While Jesus revealed God, His revelation of God was certainly not the revelation the People (including His own disciples) expected.

I was about to say at this point *we can only marvel at God's freedom*, but, even as I formulate this thought in my mind I realised that it is inadequate. To marvel at God's freedom is insufficient.

The incarnation of the Father's freedom should lead us beyond admiration to imitation!

We are called to be *free men and women under grace*, men and women who well and truly enjoy what Paul calls *the freedom of the children of God*.

An American spiritual author who died just a few years ago gets it right when he states: *Jesus calls us at Christmas to enter into the Kingdom of Liberty, to be set free by His Father's love.*

A little further on in the same reflection he remarks: *The surprise of His birth in Bethlehem fires a longing to be free from self and free for others. It sparks a search for intelligent and imaginative ways to celebrate an unconventional Christmas.*

Christmas is about more than eating turkey and Brussels sprouts!

Further on, the spiritual write I refer to reminds us: *The God we encounter in Jesus is free from preoccupation with His own glory, free to be for us, free to be gracious, free to love and let be.*

During this *Great Year of Mercy* we are being called not only to contemplate, but to emulate the freedom of our God revealed in Christ-Jesus. We are being called to allow ourselves to be freed up and to free up the people around us in the way Jesus freed up those He encountered.

We really celebrate Christmas when we become Christlike!

The Jesus of the gospels invites us to imitate Him during this *Great Year of Mercy* by freeing up people around us. Some may query that statement and ask: *How might the Lord be asking me to do that? How can any of us free another?* To free others up is within our possibility if and when we leave the Lord free to act within us and reach out to others through us. We can (or rather through us, Jesus can) free captives, such as: people who are bound by loneliness and isolation, or again others locked away in guilt and shame (that may even be guilt and shame they feel in our regard because of some ill they have done us and for which we can be holding them bound by our failure to offer forgiveness). Jesus may be asking us to free yet others by bringing His message of hope and consolation when they are held in despair, or when their hearts are troubled. Jesus might be asking us to simply invite someone to our table these days (we know how important table fellowship was for Jesus) ... We could go on.

When we reach out to someone who is bound what we are doing is what the Bible tells us God did in regard to His people: *He called them out of Egypt.*

Ultimately, the One we are ministering to when we reach out to someone who is suffering is Christ Himself. We can apply those words of the Old Testament, initially applied to Israel, to Jesus Himself – this is something the gospels do in the Infancy Narrative: *I called my Son* (that is, Jesus – Jesus in others) out of Egypt and led Him (them) into freedom. We do precisely that when we offer to others a reflection of God's own joy by showing them a little graciousness.