

The Nativity of our Lord: Christmas Day 2005

Text: John 1:1-18

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Grace and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ

King David the Psalmist says that he walks in the valley of the shadow of death. We all do. This valley of tears here on earth is darkened with the shadow cast by the tombstone. And in that shadow it is colder than the deepest winter day. It is the heartache of opening presents without grandma or grandpa. It is the echo of your lonely voice in a house that once rang with the sounds of your beloved. It is the numbing hatred at the injustice of a life cut short. It is the growing dread of one more visit to the doctor. And it is the fate of us all.

The world, the devil and our sin-weak flesh want us to forget this. They want us to try to ignore the valley of the shadow of death. They whisper to us, "Don't think about such sad things. They'll only make you feel badly. Just go amuse yourself with something else for a while. Play a game. Go spend some money. Watch some TV. Just don't worry about anything so serious. Ignore the gathering darkness."

But this darkness cannot be ignored and it cannot be escaped because it is not only outside of us but in us. This is because, as St. Paul tells us, "the wages of sin is death." The shadow of death has its cause in the darkness of our own souls. It is the icy shoulder turned against a neighbor in need. It is the numb dullness of heart caused by years of refusal to forgive. It is the emptiness of a husband who would rather look at women in a magazine that talk to his own wife. It is a darkness in every man, woman, and child for all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Therefore think on these things – ponder the darkness and repent.

Repent, for the Light has shined in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it nor even understood it. The Lord our God is gracious and merciful and has looked upon us with kindness. He has seen us languishing in the valley of the shadow of death, wallowing in the darkness of our hearts, having fallen into the pit we dug for ourselves. He has seen it – and he has done something about it. The Word of God, the eternal Son of the Father, the Light that enlightens every man, woman, and child,

has come into this dark world and scattered the darkness.

He did not send a mere angel. He did not send a telegram. He did not leave us to the whims and fancies of the philosopher or the scientist. No, the Light came Himself to save us. But how could he do this? How could we receive him who created the heavens and the earth and not be consumed? How could we bear to look on the sinless face of God when we are so full of darkness? For surely darkness is destroyed by Light: so how could we poor sinners survive an encounter with our Lord and God Jesus Christ?

St. John tells us: the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. The Word became flesh. God himself, the ever blessed and holy second person of the Trinity, became a human being like you and me. He came to make his dwelling with us. This incarnation, this en-fleshment of our Lord Jesus Christ is what was long prophesied to the people of Israel in their Tabernacle and Temple. And just as the pillar of fire by night scattered the darkness for the Israelites, so our Lord Jesus Christ has scattered the deeper darkness of our sin and God's wrath against it.

For the Light which came into the world came for a reason. He came to scatter darkness and enlighten every man, woman, and child. But how could he do this? How could the darkness be swallowed up never to return? St. Paul tell us, "God made him who knew no sin to become sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God." Our Lord Jesus Christ battled the darkness of our sin. The Light Himself knew the darkness of death. The Son Himself cried out from the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" The God of Israel who received the sacrifices of old became incarnate, became a human being, that he might fulfill those shadowy sacrifices with the one true sacrifice of propitiation of his own body on the cross. Joy to the world – the Lord is come, come to die for us and for our salvation, come to rise again for our justification and eternal life.

Great indeed is the mystery of our Faith, dear Christians. That God the Son would take up our flesh and become sin for us is a truth so beyond our feeble imaginations. For one of us might choose to die and take the punishment for a righteous man, but God, in his mercy, chose to die for us sinners who had turned our back on him. In no way did we deserve this salvation, and thus it is by grace – grace upon grace as our text says.

And make no mistake – this grace and truth which comes through the Word made Flesh is for you. As the Israelites passed through the Red Sea and so were incorporated into the people of God to follow the Tabernacle of his presence, so you have had this prophecy of rebirth through water fulfilled in your life. For you have received what our Epistle lesson calls the washing of rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit. You, dear Christian, are baptized and so the life, death, and resurrection of the babe of Bethlehem, that Lion of Judah, that Lamb of God, is now your life, death and resurrection. In Baptism you were plunged down into the Good Friday grave of him who came at Christmas and were then drawn up through his Easter Resurrection. You are now a beloved child of God for Christ Jesus' sake, an heir of the eternal life he earned for you on the cross.

And these wonderful gifts of Christmas – these gifts of the incarnation – these gifts of God become a human being are not far off, but they are very near you. For Christmas has no ending. That is to say, long after the lights are down and the leftovers are taken care of, long after the relatives have gone home and the decorations are boxed up – still our Lord Jesus Christ is incarnate, still he is God and Human at the same time. And thus still the Incarnate One comes to us in his Body and Blood. No Christmas dinner of goose or ham or figgy pudding can compare to the true Christmas Meal. That is the fullest and best celebration of this Holy Day, for it is Christmas, Christ's Mass, Christ's Meal of his true Body and true Blood. By the miracle of his Word, the Word made Flesh causes his flesh and blood to be present here for us Christians to eat and drink for the forgiveness of our sins. And so we have the deepest communion with our Lord as we continue to be incorporated – em-bodied – into his body. So we have the Life of him who is the Light placed into us as his body and blood are put into our bodies.

So rejoice Christians. Rejoice and be joyous and feast this Holy Christmas Day. Rejoice even though you celebrate it in the valley of the shadow of death. Indeed rejoice all the more for this reason. Let the darkness of this world and even your own sin be drowned out with the enlightening joy of Christ. He has conquered death by his death and resurrection. Indeed, those separated from us by death rejoice with us this day as the Holy Liturgy proclaims: with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify the glorious Name of our Saving God. Our Lord Jesus Christ has come, and he is coming again to raise us and all the dead and give us new and

everlasting life. This is our Christian hope. This is the joy of Christmas. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Pr. H. R. Curtis