

Christmas

I take as my text today from St. Paul's Letter to Titus:

The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that....we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and that glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ....

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight O Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.”

Tonight, we are celebrating a wonderful moment in time, that moment in the fullness of time when God came into the world as one of us, entering into our time and space as a human child, and taking upon Himself our flesh, condescending to be with us and among us, experiencing our emotions: our fears, our longings, our pain and sorrows, our joys and our love.

I cannot, without deep emotion, think upon the wonder of that moment; how all His creation must have rejoiced at His very presence. Here was God, the Creator, all powerful and all-knowing, entering into the physical world where we could touch Him and see Him; our Creator becoming one of His own creation.

Before that moment in time, we could only, at best, hear his voice through the prophets, such as we heard tonight during the Lessons and Carols, with readings from the Prophet Isaiah.

Though we have no official record of His birth, only the Gospel accounts, we are assured that our Lord Jesus Christ entered this life in the very same manner that we all do. And from that moment on, He grew, felt, and functioned just as we do. Yet, He was God, Very God of Very God.

As we celebrate the Incarnation, the account by St. Luke paints a beautiful picture that lingers in our minds; he has provided for us one of the most beautiful passages of the Bible; but it is when we turn to the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to Titus that we see most vividly the moral power that is the result of Jesus Christ coming into this world, the miracle of change that He can work in us, and the hope of an eternal inheritance.

Hope. That is what God has given us in his Son and our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Indeed, we could say it is **Hope** that we are celebrating this night, as we remember with awe the birth of the Messiah.

St. Luke, in describing the birth of our Lord in Bethlehem, the Hope of mankind, brings to the forefront the “Love of God” expressed idyllically.

St. Paul, in turn, expresses this Hope of Mankind more practically, yet with its own beauty.

He sees in the Incarnation a powerful and miraculous change that Christ can effect in us.

His words to Titus are reminiscent of those of the Prophet Isaiah; indeed, in the first chapter of Isaiah we hear these words:

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

What Paul is saying to Titus is that the power to make this miraculous change in our moral conduct recounted in Isaiah comes from Jesus Christ working within us.

When Jesus Christ came into this world, He came, not only to liberate us from our past sins, but also to enable us to attain to the perfect life in this world, not that we will actually live a perfect life, but that we can attain to, or live our lives toward this goal.

In juxtaposition to the Gospel Passage from St. Luke, Paul's words seem to diminish the beauty of the Incarnation that lingers in our mind's eye; but, in reality, he is unveiling for us another aspect of its beauty: the Hope of Eternal Life.

That hope is realized through the power of Jesus Christ working to effect a miraculous change in us, filling our hearts with His love, and guiding our consciences.

Through the Incarnation, we are brought under the dispensation of Grace, brought into the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which brings salvation. Thus, we are no longer under the Law, rather, we are under Grace.

The effect of this Grace and the love of Christ is not to live to self but to Him, else that grace is received in vain.

The not so apparent beauty of this passage from St. Paul lies in the whole concept of the moral power of the Incarnation as the miracle of change that comes about within us through the working of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may become fit heirs of His heavenly Kingdom.

Through the words of St. Paul, we are encouraged to put away worldliness, and abandon our sinful nature, and "to live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world." By so living, we may be purified by our Lord, and made fit to be set apart, and made special possessions of God.

The sobering words from St. Paul as we celebrate this joyous occasion, the Birth of our Lord and Saviour, give us pause to reflect on the fullness of that moment in time as recorded by St. Luke.

Our Eucharistic Celebration is a part of that fullness, as is our coming together, not as strangers in the world, but as brothers and sisters in Christ.

On this night, in a stable in the town of Bethlehem, was born Hope, for it is in Jesus Christ that we have hope, for we are “heirs through hope of an everlasting kingdom” — He is that Hope.

It is indeed a time to rejoice. A time for good Christian men to rejoice, “With heart, and soul, and voice...”

We lift up our voices on this glorious occasion in song and praise. But, sometimes, as we sing the carols of Christmas, we gloss over the words, caught up in the joy and excitement of the moment.

Pause for a moment with me now to revisit the last verse of hymn 31, “Good Christian Men Rejoice.” The words seem to carry forward Paul’s concept of the hope we have in our Saviour, and the joy that this message carries.

Let me read the words to you:

*Good Christian men, rejoice,
With heart, and soul, and voice;
Now ye need not fear the grave;
Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all
To gain his everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save!
Christ was born to save!*

In the fullness of time, at a moment in history, God entered the world in a very human way — in a way that was unexpected. He took upon Himself our flesh: in so doing, He bore all our emotions; He felt what we felt; He lived a life as could any of us; and He experienced our mortality. In doing so, He took upon Himself and bore the sins of the world, to be nailed to the Cross with Him, freeing us, saving us from the ravages of Satan.

Jesus Christ entered the world in love, born of a Jewish maiden whose love of and trust in God was unsurpassed; born in humbled surroundings, yet announced by angels, a chorus of Angels singing:

Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Can you imagine a multitude of the heavenly host singing the Gloria in excelsis? Each time we rehearse those majestic words, we too are joining with that heavenly host to give glory and praise to God for all His wondrous works, and especially to give thanks for that glorious event.

However complex the theology of the Incarnation may be, or intense the efforts to discredit the Biblical records, nothing can ever overshadow the simple beauty of that singular event in all of history: the birth of the eternal Son of God, in the most common of circumstances, to loving parents, who, not fully comprehending the enormity of the event, nonetheless, put their faith in God and willingly became instruments of His Peace.

We too have the opportunity to be instruments of that same Peace, with Mary and Joseph as our examples through their selfless love of God and the power of their faith.

On this Christmas Eve, as we celebrate the Birthday of our Messiah, we are joined together through the Holy Eucharist, not only with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, but with all Christians in all time, with all the saints, the angels, the archangels, and all the heavenly host, as one body in Christ. We join our voices in joyful song:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.