

Christmas Message 2011

Most Rev. Mark L. Bartchak, Bishop of Altoona-Johnstown

What is it about Christmas that draws people together? Why do we always go to Grandma's house for a big dinner, or visit family and friends who we see but once a year to exchange presents? Why do we attend one Christmas party after another with people we don't really know? Whatever the reason, it is often said that no one wants to be alone at Christmas.

One of the most popular Christmas songs of the 20th century captures that sentiment. Many of us even associate it with the voice of Bing Crosby. It has just two verses:

"I'll be home for Christmas, you can plan on me. Please have snow and mistletoe, and presents on the tree. Christmas Eve will find me, where the love light gleams. I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams."

The sentimental quality of this song expresses optimism and heartfelt longing. It also conveys a bit of anxiousness or expected disappointment by admitting that the desire to be home for Christmas may not be experienced in reality, but only in a dream.

Christmas is indeed about people coming together and Christmas is all about being home, but not in the sentimental way expressed in a favorite Christmas song. Coming together and being home for Christmas is all about the joyful mystery of the Incarnation of our God.

In spite of not being home for Christmas, and not even being able to find a decent place to stay, like an inn with other people around, the Blessed Virgin Mary and her husband Joseph came together to a stable in Bethlehem where they were joined by the Son of God who was born in that humble place. Immediately, the birth of Jesus Christ began to bring other people together to experience this holy and joyful mystery.

The news first came to the most ordinary of ordinary people. Shepherds were quietly tending their sheep when angels appeared to them. Their first reaction was a combination of anxiety, distress and fear. They wondered if this was just a dream, but they "went in haste" to see for themselves. When they arrived at the stable in Bethlehem, they found the dwelling place of God! Those shepherds were indeed home for Christmas and it was not in a dream.

By his birth in our world, Jesus Christ demonstrated that God has taken the initiative to come to us. Saint John the Evangelist reminds us in the beginning of the Gospel that the eternal Word of God chose to become a human person and make his home, his dwelling place among us.

To be home for Christmas, to experience the best family reunion possible, to seek the true "love light," to be showered with gifts, and to find the fulfillment of our deepest desires and dreams, we must go home to Bethlehem. We must go home and be at home. For Christians, to be at home is to be with the living God who continues to dwell among us.

The Nativity scenes in our homes and churches remind us of God's infinite love for us. Each time we hear the story of Christ's birth, we are reminded that God is not distant and that God is not disinterested. We are reminded that God is very near to us.

Pope Benedict XVI has often said that "this message is ever new and ever surprising, for it surpasses even our most daring hope." He further explains that it is "not merely a proclamation; it is an event, a happening, which credible witnesses saw, heard and touched in the person of Jesus Christ who was born to us as our Savior."

In other words, it is not a dream or something that we experience in a dream. The shepherds ran to Bethlehem when Jesus Christ was born and his disciples ran to the empty tomb when he rose from the dead. Why did they run? The answer is quite simple.

No one wants to be alone. As the song reminds us, we all want to be home for Christmas. And as Jesus Christ himself reminds us, he is at home with us; he is with us always. It is when we are united with God through Christ that we are truly at home.

It is in and through Christ that each one of us can be at home with ourselves, because it is through him that we discover our true identity as children of God; made in the image and likeness of our loving Father. It is also in and through the person of Jesus Christ that each one of us can be at home with others, because Jesus Christ teaches us how to love.

Jesus Christ teaches us that mercy, and forgiveness, and joy, and peace, and justice, are all possible and are not only to be found in our dreams. They are possible and real, because it is Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem, who is true mercy, and forgiveness, and joy, and peace, and justice. These are the real gifts of Christmas; hand-delivered to us by the one whose humble birth we joyfully celebrate.

My prayer for you, for your families, for our communities, for our country, and for our entire world is that these gifts are received in abundance.

I pray that when these gifts are received you will unwrap and quickly share them with others so they can discover what it truly means to be home for Christmas. And don't worry; these gifts will be replaced faster than you can give them away.

When you are on your way to Grandma's house for Christmas dinner, or visiting family and friends to exchange gifts, or attending another Christmas party, or making your way into a church to give praise and thanks to God on Christmas eve or Christmas day, pray for everyone you greet. Think about how they will know what you believe; that God is at home with us and we are to be at home with him, not in a dream, but in and through the love of Jesus Christ, a love that we must always be ready to share.

I wish all of you a Blessed Christmas! Rejoice in the Birth of Christ our Savior!