



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 20 December 2000

1. *"Come, Key of David, opening the gates of God's eternal kingdom: free the prisoners of darkness".*

We pray this invocation in today's liturgy which invites us to turn our gaze to the One who is born to redeem humanity. We are now on the threshold of Christmas and the entreaty of the expectant people grows more intense: "Come, Lord Jesus", come and free "the prisoners of darkness"!

We are preparing to commemorate the event that is at the heart of the history of salvation: the birth of the Son of God, who came to dwell among us to redeem every human creature by his death on the Cross. The Easter mystery is already present in the mystery of Christmas; in the night of Bethlehem we already glimpse the Easter Vigil. The light that illuminates the grotto directs us to the brightness of the risen Christ who overcomes the darkness of the tomb.

This Christmas, then, is a special one, the Christmas of the 2,000th anniversary of Christ: an important "birthday", which we have celebrated with the Jubilee Year, meditating on the extraordinary event of the eternal Word made man for our salvation. We are preparing to relive the imminent Christmas celebrations with renewed faith, to receive the fullness of their spiritual message.

2. At Christmas, we naturally think of Bethlehem: "But you", says the prophet Micah, "O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel" (Mi 5: 1). These words are echoed by the Evangelist Matthew. To the Magi, who want King Herod to tell them "where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" (Mt 2: 2), the high priests and the scribes of the people communicate what the ancient prophet

wrote of Bethlehem: "from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel" (*Mt 2: 6*).

The Church of the East prays thus in the Office of the Orthros for the solemnity of Christmas: "Bethlehem, make ready; sing, city of Zion; exult, wilderness that has attracted joy: the star moves to show the Christ, who is about to be born in Bethlehem; a grotto welcomes the One whom absolutely nothing can contain, and a manger is prepared to receive eternal life" (Stichirá idiómela, Anthologion).

3. During these days, Bethlehem becomes the place on which all believers focus their eyes. The representations of the nativity scene, which popular tradition has spread to every corner of the earth, help us to reflect better on the message which continues to radiate from Bethlehem for all humanity. In a poor grotto, we contemplate a God who for love makes himself a child. He gives joy to those who welcome him and reconciliation and peace to the peoples. The Great Jubilee, which we are celebrating, invites us to open our hearts to the One who unlocks "the gates of the kingdom of heaven" for us.

Preparing ourselves to receive him requires first and foremost an attitude of intense and trusting prayer. Making room for him in our hearts demands a serious commitment to convert to his love.

It is he who frees us from the shadow of evil and asks us to make a concrete contribution so that his plan of salvation can be carried out. The prophet Isaiah describes it with vivid images: "the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, / and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. / Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, / and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. / And the effect of righteousness will be peace, / and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever" (*Is 32: 15-17*).

This is the gift we must implore with prayerful trust, this is the project we are called to make our own with constant concern! In my Message to believers and to people of good will for the forthcoming World Day of Peace, I pointed out that "on the path to better understanding among peoples there remain many challenges which the world must face" (n. 18), and I therefore recalled that "everyone must feel the moral duty to take concrete and timely steps to promote the cause of peace and understanding among peoples" (*ibid.*).

May Christmas revive in everyone the will to become an active and courageous builder of the civilization of love. It is only thanks to everyone's contribution that Micah's prophecy and the proclamation which rang out on the night of Bethlehem will bear their fruit and that it will be possible to live our Christian Christmas to the full.

I welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present. As we prepare for the coming of Christ, I ask Almighty God to bless you and your families with his gifts of joy and peace. I wish you all a happy and blessed Christmas!

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