



The Nativity of the Lord



Date: Sunday, December 25, 2016 | **Season:** Christmas | **Year:** A

First Reading: Isaiah 62:11–12

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 97:1, 6, 11–12

Second Reading: Titus 3:4–7

Gospel Acclamation: Luke 2:14

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:15–20

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Let me say again Merry Christmas, and I hope everyone had a good night, and that Santa's new built-in sleigh-GPS is working and that he managed to find all of your chimneys!

I would like to say a few words today about our readings – and how they convey the Good News of Jesus Christ to us today. That on this day, our Saviour who is Christ the Lord has been born. My message – in a sentence – is that we remember today to recognise WHO Jesus was, and is still today, so that we do not forget the Joy and Hope his coming represents. And I want to tell you about this with a brief mention of Star Wars.

In our first reading this morning, we hear again from the Prophet Isaiah – the prophet whom we have heard so much of during these last weeks of Advent. He is again proclaiming joy at the expectation that God is going to restore Jerusalem and Mount Zion and its temple to their former glory. We read this on Christmas morning as part of an announcement of a new dawn: that God will gather his people from all the corners of the world and make them into a single city, a holy community. Christians read this as the promise that Gentiles too are called to the promises made to Israel. The plan of salvation, like our love this Christmas, should always be inviting and inclusive.

In our Psalm we heard how light is dawning, how the upright are joyful, how they rejoice in the Lord and give thanks.

This is our attitude at Christmas, where we celebrate that God has come into the world. We are meant to be joyful, to find reasons to rejoice together and to give thanks – for our joy is in the Child who will bring salvation – as we heard in the first reading, and as the shepherds were told in the Gospel. Now this Gospel, or Good News, is really important.

In our Gospel today we heard how the shepherds are rushing towards Bethlehem – the House of Bread – to see if what the Angels said to them was true. Let's face it – if you and I found a couple with a young baby in a stable – a Saviour would be the last thing we might think of. We often forget what it is the Angels said. The Angels said there would be a sign – and as we've heard during Advent, we have to pay attention to signs. The sign was that not only is a Saviour born in the City of David, but that he would be “wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger”. Manger or crib has become a “pretty” word to put on Christmas Cards – but it literally refers to a ‘feeding trough’ for animals. So when the Shepherds explained in the Gospel to Mary and Joseph about what they had been told, they could confirm that what the Angels said was true. The important part of the Angel's message was not that Jesus would be there, in the stable, with Mary and Joseph – but that this child, was going to be the Saviour, Christ our Lord. The Angels told the Shepherds that by this sign they would know WHO the child was. The Evangelist's point is that these lowly shepherds were prepared to accept that God might be revealed in small and insignificant ways (the presence of a feeding trough for example) and that the powerful would arrogantly disbelieve such a simple revelation. The shepherds recognized the presence of God in this child because of that sign. And so they beheld their Saviour, the Son of God. Now why is that important?

At this point I should mention Star Wars. Or rather admit that what is going on here reminds me a little bit of Star Wars. Let me explain... It's because during this time in the world there was actually someone else who was claiming to be a saviour and the ‘Son of God’ – it was Caesar Augustus, whom Luke (the Evangelist, not Skywalker) introduced us to at the beginning of this chapter of the Gospel. Historians tell me that Augustus was the adopted son of Julius Caesar who after Mark Anthony's suicide, in a move that surely did inspire some of the previous Star Wars movies, turned the Republic of Rome into an Empire, with himself at the head; he proclaimed that he had brought justice and peace to the whole world; and, declaring the deceased Julius Caesar to be divine, he

styled himself as ‘son of god’. Poets wrote songs about this new era that had begun; historians told the long story of Rome as it rose to greatness, reaching its climax (obviously) with Augustus himself. Augustus, people said, was the ‘saviour’ of the world. He was its king, its ‘lord’. And Increasingly, in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, people were beginning to worship Augustus as a god.

Now you can cue the Star Wars music – because it was precisely while this was going on, in a place far, far away, on the frontier of the empire, that a boy was born who could within a generation be hailed as the ‘son of God’; whose followers would speak of Him as ‘saviour’ and ‘lord’; and whose arrival, they thought, would bring true justice and true peace to the world. No one other than the Shepherds had heard of this at that point – but we know how the story ends, sort of like Star Wars because we all saw the sequel first. Jesus is bringing a new Kingdom – different to the world’s empire – and we are all part of that Kingdom.

The Gospel’s point is that the birth of this little boy marks the beginning of a confrontation – a war, marked by a Star – between the kingdom of God – begun in the poor and simple surroundings of a stable with humble shepherds – and the kingdoms of the world, with all their political and military strength. Emperor Augustus never heard of Jesus of Nazareth. But Jesus’ arrival set in motion events that have completely changed the world. Just think about it: within a century or so of his birth, Augustus’s successors in Rome had not only heard of Jesus; they were going to be taking steps to obliterate his followers – for beginning rebellion – again a little like Star Wars. Within just over three centuries the Emperor himself would become a Christian. And for the last two thousand years Christians have gathered together to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, in every country on earth.

Today we are being asked to recognize God – and to recognize that God has entered History and has begun the work of our salvation. He began it long ago – but it continues in our lives every day. And exactly how we have been saved we hear from St Paul in the 2nd reading. God has given us his mercy and we live it through our baptism as a people justified from sin and filled with hope of eternal life.

Filled with hope of eternal life. That is our calling – that is what we are asked to remember this Christmas – that we are joyful members of God’s Kingdom.

Christians must be a joyful people. Sometimes we forget this. That is why each year we remind ourselves of Christ's coming. A few weeks ago I stood at this pulpit and talked about how, in comparison to God's greatness, we are as little children – babies. And how God can only be smiling at us – just as we cannot help ourselves but smile at babies when we truly look into their eyes and see their joyful smiles. (Yes, I know all you young parents are just smiling and thinking "what does he know" – but I do think there is a truth in this. It is a mystery of the incarnation that God became Man in this way. That he went through everything, to save us.

God joined us in our fragility. God made himself small and weak. He really did need his nappy changed. He cried and lost his temper and needed to be held, sung to, played with and breastfed. God made himself small so we could be made larger than we could ever imagine. He did this by teaching us, through our imitation of him, how to give love, receive love and how to ask for help. God joined us in the form of a baby born to anxious, young, loving parents and in so doing, invited us to love him and see a kingdom in which weakness and vulnerability are not bad things – but rather just authentic, true and honest.

Right now we celebrate as the Shepherds did. Aware that we are not perfect, but that we too recognize that God has been born to us this day, and that the fulfillment of the prophecies that he has come to save us, is being worked out in our lives through his loving us, and forgiving us with his mercy.

Let us try to be merciful with each other this Christmas.

Because all of us are related. We all share in one baptism – and even when we quarrel – we can recognize that even with our enemies, again as in Star Wars, we are actually related to each other and that relation will outlast any separation.

Let us try to remember the reason for our joy – that the Prince of Peace has been born into the world – let us try to bring that gift of peace and mercy to everyone we meet this Christmas. For as Christ tells us, we are all sons and daughters of a Father God who loves us.

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