

A Hope for All

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The Christian holidays

by ENZO BIANCHI

The beginning of a man's life on earth: perhaps just for this extreme simplicity the message of Christmas is so universal

Christmas

The event that Christians celebrate at Christmas is not an "apparition" of God among men, but the birth of a child that only God could give to humanity, one "born of a woman" who, however, came from God and was to be narration and explanation of God. The birth of him who is Lord and God must not be taken metaphorically, but in all its real, historic sense, which the Gospel emphasizes as "sign". In fact, three times in the account of Jesus' birth the evangelist Luke repeats in the same words the image that should be looked at without distraction: "a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:7.12.16)! yes, there is also the light that shines and wraps the shepherds around, there is the divine glory that strikes fear, there is the choir of angels that sings peace for men beloved of God, but all this is only the frame that places in relief the picture and seeks to uncover for us the meaning of what it contains.

The sign that the pastors receive from the announcement of angels is of an extreme simplicity, a poor sign, a sign belonging to poor humanity: a child is born, but in the poverty of a stable, a child is born, the child of a poor couple, child is born, to whom hospitality has been denied. This is all the sign of Christmas! And yet, the child is proclaimed Messiah: The Savior and Lord is a poor child, the son of the poor, born in poverty.

If Christians in their faith were not to maintain alive the link between the child and the Lord, between poverty and glory, they would not understand the truth of Christmas. Unfortunately, Christians are always tempted to hide the child's naked poverty and would like his glory to be in power and in success, but the authentic image of Christmas disavows these desires of theirs.

Full of this understanding of the incarnation, a Christian hymn of the fourth century thus sings of the feast of Christmas:

"While deepest night,
dark and tranquil,
wrapped with its silence vales and hills,
the Son of God was born of a virgin
and obedient to the Father's will
began his life as man on earth".

The beginning of a man's life on earth: perhaps just for this extreme simplicity the message of Christmas is so universal. It is in fact a simple message, within the reach of all, beginning with the poor shepherds of Bethlehem, yet it is the announcement of a great mystery, because that son of man who is born will pass in a very ordinary manner most of his life: he will pass among other men doing good, he will work the great miracle of refound communion with God and with others using signs and marvels connected with man's basic needs: bread and wine multiplied, health restored, nature again reconciled with man, fraternal relations reestablished, life reaffirmed as stronger than death. For this reason the apostle Paul says that the manifestation of Christ in the world has as its scope "to teach us to live in this world" (Tt 2:11-12).

At Christmas Christians celebrate this mystery that has already occurred – the coming of God in the flesh of Christ – as promise and guarantee of what they still await: that God be in all humanity and that humanity be made God. But if this is the foundation of the feast, then the joy that fills it cannot be subjected to any "exclusiveness": it is joy "for all the people", for all of humanity as receiver of God's love. Christians cannot take possession of Christmas by taking it away from others, they cannot imprison the hope that is the longing of everyone's heart. If in Jesus the Creator has become creature, the Eternal has become mortal, the All-Powerful has become powerless, it is so that man could become the Son himself of God. We are confronted with that "admirabile commercium", with that "wonderful exchange", by which the fathers of the first centuries sought to explain to their contemporaries the event that had not so much changed the course of history as it had rather restored to history its sense. This is the shining hope that Christians ought still today announce

to the men and women among whom they live, so thirsting for meaning, so desirous of hope, so possessed by an expectation greater than their own heart. For Christians it is a matter of going, of staying in the midst of others with the same joy with which God came among us in the Son, the Emmanuel, the God-with-us, who cannot and should not ever become the God-against-the-others. Then Christmas – not only the Christian one, but also that “of all”. even that contagious climate of goodness that overcomes the hypocrisy of a foolish do-goodiness – will not end burned up in consuming many goods in a few hours, will not go out with the last light, will not know the depreciation of the end of season sale, but will expand, multiplying itself in daily living: it will be the pledge of a more human life, containing authentic relations and respect for the other, a life rich in meaning, capable of expressing in acts and words beauty and light, echoes of that light which shone in the deep night of Bethlehem and which ought to shine also today in every place enveloped by the darkness of pain and of non-sense. Christians know by faith that God wanted to commit himself radically to humanity in becoming man, they know that he entered history to direct it definitively towards the exit of salvation, they know that he assumed the weakness of men exposed to the offenses of evil just in order to overcome evil and death. And they are called to witness this “knowledge” of theirs in a daily taking up of poverty, of abasement to meet the other, in the consciousness that what unites men is greater than what makes them different against each other.

Yes, if at Christmas Christians are in joy, this is not a privilege reserved to them, a gift the sharing of which would frustrate it: on the contrary, it is not permitted to them to take exclusive possession of it because they cannot withdraw Christ from the humanity to which he was sent by the Father. Christmas is an invitation to hope, and this hope is offered to all.

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