

Dear Friends and Visitors

The Season of Advent unfolded with its inbuilt prodding of the human imagination to consider reality more than merely what is just outside the window, or on the computer screen, and with its lovely texts inviting to a renewal of lectio divina. Below you will find two reflections that issue, like mature fruit, from an Advent's worth of reflecting on the Promised Word

During Advent yet another man took the step of faith and risk to begin his monastic life with us, and just as the month was concluding, two days after Christmas, still another, bringing our population of postulants to four. In the short time that these men have been at the Abbey – the senior of them began in April of this year – it is verified fourfold that each person brings with him experiences, temperament, background, interests, understandings and desires that all go to shape the hosting community in significant ways. Our 54-year old Abbey following its 1500 year tradition is still malleable with the flexibility of a child.

Thanks in great part to Bernard Fitzgerald and Joseph Reisch, our fruitcakes this year were at the highest level of perfection. Thanks go also to Br Tobias and the brothers who daily throughout the year decorated, wrapped, and packaged our product. November and December are the months when the bulk of our 27,000 fruitcakes are ordered and shipped. Mavis Sharp and Matthew Flatley assisted Vicky Thompson, who oversees incoming order and shipping. This year the operation proceeded with patience, efficiency, and good humor. The only disappointment was that by mid-December we had to stop taking orders: our inventory had been sold out. Many customers, though, were happy to say they would take a cake at the soonest available date, which will be February.

Fr Mark's Homily at Midnight Mass of Christmas

What our prophet says is true: "You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing" (Is 9:2). And how? "A child is born for us, a son is given us." It is the promised Immanuel, "God with us," when Christ was born of Mary.

But there is another way to read the Hebrew of the prophet Isaiah at this point. Instead of "you have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing," the Hebrew could also be rendered, "You had increased the nation, but did not increase the joy." In this sense, the people grew in number and in strength, but their joy, if anything, just got weaker. The only joy they had was still "in the harvest," that is, in commercial success; and the only rejoicing was in victory at war and defeat of the enemy.

The nation was large and powerful but it was still, and maybe even more so, "the people that walked in darkness, and dwelt in the shadow of death," for God had not yet sent the gift that was to be the motive and cause of an altogether different quality of joy and rejoicing: "to us a son is given, unto us a child is born. The government is on his shoulder, he will be the Prince of peace, and his dominion, peace without end."

That is a new motive for joy. But the Lord had not yet given it; had not increase the joy. Still, happiness and congratulations and a sense of peace and national security came from seeing the enemy crushed, his weapons shattered, his soldiers' uniforms blood-drenched and trampled underfoot; a peace and happiness bought at the price of the humiliation of the other, of constant vigilance against revenge, and ultimately a peace based on fear and suspicion, which is not peace at heart. "You have increased, you have prospered, the nation, but you have not increased its joy."

This is not just for Israel of the 8th century BC. It is for our time, too, and maybe especially for our nation. The people is numerous, but at what caused its joy? The ancient psalm speaks for all ages and all peoples: "What can bring us happiness,' many say." Then it goes on to imagine the best case scenario: "Lift up the light of your face on us, O Lord." Should that impossibility ever happen, "you will have put into our hearts a greater joy, than people have from an abundance of corn and new wine," (Ps 4), though today we might say, "more joy than an hour's shopping spree at Wal-Mart, or even from wining the lottery, such are our values.

"What can bring us happiness" many say still, even if only when alone, after a night of pretending to be happy. "Lift up the light of your face on us, O Lord."

That is what the Lord did. That is what Christmas is. It is God lifting his face upon us. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who sat in a drunken stupor or strung out, or in the security of their own success, in the shadow of death, a light has shone upon them. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given..."

"I announce to you news of great joy, for all the people, that for you, today, is born a savior, Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10-11). This is the face of the Lord at last lifted upon us, a face we can see and celebrate, know and kiss.

The poet Joseph Brodsky says, in one of his Christmas poems,

Keenly, without blinking, through pallid stray clouds / upon a child in the manger, / from far away – from the depth of the universe, from the opposite end -- / the star was looking into the

cave. / And that was the Father's stare.

The child became a star, became the Father's stare, became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the face of God lifted upon us, light bringing joy where before there was only entertainment. What it meant both for him, the child, and for us, St Paul says so well in his letter to Titus: "The grace of God our savior has been appeared to all people...our Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself up for us, so that he might set us free from ourselves" (2:11-14). So much is contained in that phrase, "gave himself."

What is contained in it is what is also contained in Christmas. Christ who turns our mourning to joy is the man of sorrows, for us. Christmas is the entire central section of the Creed we are about to recite: conceived of the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Crucified, Died, and Buried. Christmas is the joyful mysteries, the luminous mysteries and the sorrowful mysteries. Again, Brodsky writes

Imagine the Lord, for the first time / from darkness, and stranded immensely in distance, / recognizing Himself in the Son / of Man: homeless, going out of Himself / in a homeless one. Christmas is the world's embrace of this alien as on of its own, and the alien's embrace in return.

For ST Bernard, the incarnation is a kiss; it is a kiss of peace (Sermon2 on the Song of Songs 2.3). "The mouth that kisses," he says, "signifies the Word who assumes human nature, the nature assumed receives the kiss; the kiss, however, that takes its being from the giver and the receiver, is a person that is formed by both, none other than "the one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus."

"Normally," adds Bernard, "the touch of lip on lip is the sign of the loving embrace of hearts, but this conjoining of natures brings together the human and divine, shows God reconciling to himself all things...for hi is peace."

This peace, the gift of Christmas, announced by the angels to the shepherds, is the peace the world cannot give, we should remind some people. This peace, who is a person, is the joy God has finally magnified to us, for to us a child is born, to us a son is given. And yet, or so I am told, it is becoming a source of strain and conflict publicly to wish someone "Merry Christmas!" Christmas is grace, it is light, it is release, it is joy, glory, and peace. Why not then wish one another a merry on? It is, I believe, because so much happiness not our making is too much to bear. Or, to put it another way, you can't take the gift without the certainty that it will change you. Paul puts the matter briefly, yet so clearly, it needs no further comment: "The grace that appeared teaches us to reject...worldly desire...and to live justly in this present time." To say

"Merry Christmas" honestly would be to risk the threat of becoming not only a person of joy and peace, but also a person very different from the one we have spent a lifetime trying to construct for ourselves. Perhaps most of all, to say "Merry Christmas" would mean to buy into – or be bought into – a community and no longer living as if alone. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the angels...add the Magi, the star, the disciples, the holy women, the centurion, Cornelius and his household, the City of Corinth, Galatia, Rome...You have expanded the people, and you have increased their joy, for a Child is born for us.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those who dare to say, "Merry Christmas," and kiss the child who makes of the two one.

Fr Filomeno's homily for the Feast of the Holy Family, December 26

We have the practice of giving and receiving presents at Christmas because God gave the best of Himself to us when He was born of the Virgin Mary at Bethlehem and welcomed as a family member into the home of Joseph. The Holy Family is the best blessing of God because they give all of themselves to us for imitation and inspiration as well as for companionship and friendship. Their family home of Nazareth is a school and an effective education in the Gospel as the great Pope Paul VI reflected upon when he visited Nazareth 41 years ago. The virtues and values that this family of Nazareth exemplify for and teach us are contained in the 1st and 2nd reading of today's Mass: Heartfelt compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, forgiveness of one another, prayer and listening to God's word, and gratitude. Respectful care of and attention to the elderly is another family value, in the Asian cultures a determining factor of civilization and indispensable condition for material prosperity: honor for a father atones for sins and reverence for a mother stores up riches, as Sirach said.

The Gospel gives us a fair glance even though a quick one at Joseph. The Gospel tells us of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt, and we see in St Joseph a man who could act under death threats and extreme pressure because he believed and trusted with all humility. Like the Heavenly Father, the person of St Joseph is hidden in the great silence of the mystery of God, but it was through him that the Child and later the adult Jesus learned the experience and gained the insight that God indeed is Abba because that is what he called Joseph throughout their life together. Mary gathered up like treasures these and many other incidents involving the men in her life, Jesus and Joseph, pondered deeply upon them in her heart.

It is no use to complain and lament the sad and confusing situation of many contemporary families. The point of the message the church gives on this feast is not to point the finger at many of the anti-family programs and valued in today's society, but to empower and encourage

the many other families in spite of pressures and dysfunction, to continue in their love and care for one another, and to instruct and direct social institutions help families at risk and provide for their special needs.

Finally, when Christmas first started to be celebrated in Rome in the 5th century, the pope at the time, St Leo the Great, told his people that no one should be left out from the celebration and joy of Christmas, not even the sinner or the pagan -- in other words, those who do not belong or are marginalized. No, they should be included because it was precisely for them that the Lord came to establish for himself a universal family. At this Holy Mass and indeed at every Eucharist we celebrate we are reminded that we have family obligations to those who are related to us by blood but we have even greater ones to those with whom we are called to become the family of God. God bless you and your families especially those who are not present here and have special needs. Do something particularly kind to them and discover the joy of Christmas rise in your hearts.

Fr Mark, Abbot