
WONDERFUL ADVENTS



Christmas a celebration of the past, the present, or the future? It is not all that easy to come up with the answer. Is Christmas a children's feast, a feast for young people, for adults, or for the elderly? The celebration of Christmas will take on whatever hue and colouring you give it.

TURNED TO THE FUTURE

As surprising as it may seem, Christmas is first of all a celebration of the future. Doesn't the Advent season lead us to the coming of the Reign of God? We make ready for the Lord's return. « *Now we watch for the day, hoping that the salvation promised us will be ours when Christ our Lord will come again in glory.* » [Advent Preface 1] « *In his love Christ has filled us with joy as we prepare to celebrate his birth, so that when he comes he may find us watching in prayer, our hearts filled with wonder and praise.* » [Advent Preface 2] An appropriate hymn could be, « *Turned to the future we walk toward the light, Son of the Living God. Turned to the future like a people waiting for the rising Son.* » The liturgical texts for the year's end have invited us to watchful waiting, and they have called us to keep our lamps trimmed and ready. Hope in the future coming of Jesus casts light on our lives and brings them a sense of fulfilment. We anxiously await the kingdom of justice and peace, of holiness and life, inaugurated by Jesus. Repeating the theme of the day of the Lord, our forebears had, in the wake of the prophets, composed the unforgettable *Dies irae, dies illa*, for the Advent season, singing of that day when God will give to each as each deserves, whether for good or ill. « *How terrible it will be when he Judge will appear, for a final judgment. Fearful, majestic King who saves out of pure goodness, save me, source of pity.* » For our contemporaries, this time will be more a manifestation of Mercy than a settling of scores between God and humankind.

THE DIVINE CHILD IS BORN

If we look at the beautiful decorations of our houses, villages, and towns, and if we listen to the Christmas carols, we shall quickly understand that for the majority Christmas marks the anniversary of the birth of Jesus. It is so important to remember this if we do not want Christmas to turn into a "Whatever-feast," like some trivialised winter holiday. It is good to hear these carols that sing about God's infinite love for us. The Father loved the world so much that He gave us His Son. Emmanuel has come into our midst. And the Word became man and dwelt among us. « *We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.* » [1 John 1:1-2] It is good to read Luke's and Matthew's Infancy narratives in the Bible: they are a summary of God's promises come to fruition. « *Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.* » [Luke 2:14]

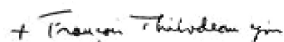
YOU ARE THERE AT THE HEART OF OUR LIVES

A third hymn could specify another dimension of Christmas, a celebration of the present: « *You are there at the heart of our lives, and you it is who supports us; you are there at the heart of our lives, alive yourself, O Jesus Christ.* » As he has promised, Jesus is among us and will remain so until the end of time. He is among us through

his Word, his Church, his sacraments; he is among us at the heart of events, in solidarity with each human being, but especially with the destitute and the oppressed. My pastoral letter of last May was meant to be a prayer of gratitude for this wonderful presence of Jesus. A [French] hymn sings of this particular feature: « *It is Christmas each time we wipe a tear from a child's face; it is Christmas every time arms are laid down, every time there is understanding among us; it is Christmas every time a war is avoided and our hands are extended to others; it is Christmas every time we force misery to back off. It is Christmas on earth every day because Christmas, my brother, is love. It is Christmas when forgiving hearts join in fellowship; it is Christmas when there is hope for genuine love; it is Christmas when lies come to an end and make room for joy, and when in the depths of our lives the suffering that binds us is touched by pity. It is Christmas in the eyes of the poor who is visited in the hospital, it is Christmas in the hearts of all those we invite to share in the common joy; it is Christmas to the one who shares our bread today; it is Christmas when the beggar forgets the insults and is no longer hungry.* » This is a meaningful text which we can tie in with that in Matthew's gospel where Jesus reveals the greatness of each of the above gestures: « *Just as you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.* » [Matthew 25:40]

HE HAS COME, HE IS COMING, HE WILL COME AGAIN

Even if we must stress the future so as to recall an essential facet of Christmas, I enjoy meditating on the teaching of St. Francis of Assisi, the Poor Man who made the first manger scene to remind us very simply of the birth of Jesus; and I like to remember the greatness of every mark of sharing and mutual help, of justice and of love that we make. The divine liturgy which we can celebrate has the marvellous power to remind us that *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever*. As we near the new millennium, may our hearts be filled with a sense of marvel and gratitude, of goodness and mercy. Jesus has come, Jesus is coming, Jesus for every man, woman, and child, for all time and all places. May this feast of Christmas bring you much joy. Jesus comes to meet us and he wants to live among us. Let us go to meet him, and the encounter will be so beautiful! These are marvellous times that help us discover the closeness of our loving God. Let us often say, « *His love is from age to age.* » Merry Christmas to you and yours!



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« From A Bishop's Journal » (205) (24 December 1997)