

Pope Francis' Homily at Midnight Mass, Christmas, 2017

Mary "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (*Lk 2:7*). In these plain and clear words, Luke brings us to the heart of that holy night: Mary *gave birth*; she gave us Jesus, the *Light* of the world. A simple story that plunges us into the event that changes our history for ever. Everything, that night, became a source of hope.

Let us go back a few verses. By decree of the Emperor, Mary and Joseph found themselves forced to set out. They had to leave their people, their home and their land, and to undertake a journey in order to be registered in the census. This was no comfortable or easy journey for a young couple about to have a child: they had to leave their land. At heart, they were full of hope and expectation because of the child about to be born; yet their steps were weighed down by the uncertainties and dangers that attend those who have to leave their home behind.

Then they found themselves having to face perhaps the most difficult thing of all. They arrived in Bethlehem and experienced that it was a land that was not expecting them. A land where there was no place for them.

And there, where everything was a challenge, Mary gave us Emmanuel. The Son of God had to be born in a stable because his own had no room for him. "He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him" (*Jn 1:11*). And there, amid the gloom of a city that had no room or place for the stranger from afar, amid the darkness of a bustling city which in this case seemed to want to build itself up by turning its back on others... it was precisely there that the revolutionary spark of God's love was kindled. In Bethlehem, a small chink opens up for those who have lost their land, their country, their dreams; even for those overcome by the asphyxia produced by a life of isolation.

So many other footsteps are hidden in the footsteps of Joseph and Mary. We see the tracks of entire families forced to set out in our own day. We see the tracks of millions of persons who do not choose to go away but, driven from their land, leave behind their dear ones. In many cases this departure is filled with hope, hope for the future; yet for many others this departure can only have one name: survival. Surviving the Herods of today, who, to impose their power and increase their wealth, see no problem in shedding innocent blood.

Mary and Joseph, for whom there was no room, are the first to embrace the One who comes to give all of us our document of citizenship. The One who in his poverty and humility proclaims and shows that true power and authentic freedom are shown in honouring and assisting the weak and the frail.

That night, the One who had no place to be born is proclaimed to those who had no place at the table or in the streets of the city. The shepherds are the first to hear this Good News. By reason of their work, they were men and women forced to live on the edges of society. Their state of life, and the places they had to stay, prevented them from observing all the ritual prescriptions of religious purification; as a result, they were considered unclean. Their skin, their clothing, their smell, their way of speaking, their origin, all betrayed them. Everything about them generated mistrust. They were men and women to be kept at a distance, to be feared. They were considered pagans among the believers, sinners among the just, foreigners among

the citizens. Yet to them – pagans, sinners and foreigners – the angel says: “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (*Lk 2:10-11*).

This is the joy that we tonight are called to share, to celebrate and to proclaim. The joy with which God, in his infinite mercy, has embraced us *pagans, sinners and foreigners*, and demands that we do the same.

The faith we proclaim tonight makes us see God present in all those situations where we think he is absent. He is present in the unwelcomed visitor, often unrecognizable, who walks through our cities and our neighbourhoods, who travels on our buses and knocks on our doors.

This same faith impels us to make space for a new social imagination, and not to be afraid of experiencing new forms of relationship, in which none have to feel that there is no room for them on this earth. Christmas is a time for turning the power of fear into the power of charity, into power for a new imagination of charity. The charity that does not grow accustomed to injustice, as if it were something natural, but that has the courage, amid tensions and conflicts, to make itself a “house of bread”, a land of hospitality. That is what Saint John Paul II told us: “Do not be afraid! Open wide the doors for Christ” (*Homily for the Inauguration of the Pontificate*, 22 October 1978).

In the Child of Bethlehem, God comes to meet us and make us active sharers in the life around us. He offers himself to us, so that we can take him into our arms, lift him and embrace him. So that in him we will not be afraid to take into our arms, raise up and embrace the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned (cf. *Mt 25:35-36*). “Do not be afraid! Open wide the doors for Christ”. In this Child, God invites us to be messengers of hope. He invites us to become sentinels for all those bowed down by the despair born of encountering so many closed doors. In this child, God makes us agents of his hospitality.

Moved by the joy of the gift, little Child of Bethlehem, we ask that your crying may shake us from our indifference and open our eyes to those who are suffering. May your tenderness awaken our sensitivity and recognize our call to see you in all those who arrive in our cities, in our histories, in our lives. May your revolutionary tenderness persuade us to feel our call to be agents of the hope and tenderness of our people.