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TODAY A SAVIOUR IS BORN TO YOU

**Christmas Eve
24 December 1977**

Isaiah 9:1-6

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

... Juan Antonio Gutiérrez¹, for this unexpected showing of solidarity he brings on his return from a foreign trip. I thank you, dear radio listeners and faithful gathered here. In your applause I sense the throbbing sentiment of a church that is ever more united in solidarity so as to bear witness in the world to the mercy and salvation we are told about on this holy night.

In the readings you just heard I find three ideas that will form my Christmas message: first, the apostle Paul and Luke the evangelist, speaking about Mary, announce that «the time came for her» (Luke 2:6); second, the three readings use wonderful words to describe this child who is born in Bethlehem; and third, I want to consider the call that the word of God makes to each one of us as collaborators in this undertaking that God has commanded his own Son to carry out.

The time came for her

First of all, I want to explain the reason for this joy of Christmas. It seems as though on this night, December 24, 1977, the angels are singing for the first time over our people: «Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests» (Luke 2:14). And it seems as though people are hearing for the first time and being surprised by the good news of the angels' announcement in Bethlehem: «We proclaim to you good news of great joy; today a Savior has been born for you» (Luke 2:10-11). Sisters and brothers, this is the solemn hour of which the evangelist speaks, referring to Mary: «The time came for her» (Luke 2:6). It is not only the hour that arrives for each woman who gives birth to her child—this is a decisive hour. That child who will come forth from the virginal womb of Mary marks such a solemn moment that from that time on history has been divided into before Christ and after Christ.

Before Christ everything was simply hope, promise, prophecy. When people finally saw Christ present, they asked, «Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?» (Luke 7:19). The One who was the hope of the nations, the hope of the ancient prophets and patriarchs, today becomes reality in this newborn child. From Bethlehem on, all the hope that reached the fullness of time in God's ultimate revelation can no longer survive without Christ. From that moment on, as the Council tells us, Christ is the «Lord of history» (GS 41), even of the history that preceded him. No one born of woman has ever been spoken of in such a profound way *before being born* as was Christ our Lord. What distinguishes this hour of Christ? It is

¹ The greeting and opening words of the homily are not recorded on the tape.

distinguished by the great ideal that God has for humanity: «Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests» (Luke 2:14). This does not mean that God waits on human benevolence before acting in favor of humanity. «By this we know that God loves us: while we were sinners and had turned our backs to him, yet he loved us and designed a plan for us sinners» (Rom 5:8). This plan is described for us tonight by the prophet Isaiah as a kingdom that will be established by this child, a kingdom that is boundlessly peaceful, a kingdom that is sustained by justice and based on righteousness, a kingdom that will endure forever (Isa 9:6). And Saint Paul says in his letter to Titus that Christ has come to form a people purified of their sins, a people who will be his glory not only in time but also in eternity (Titus 2:14).

With the coming of Christ, sisters and brothers, God has injected himself into history. With the birth of Christ the kingdom of God is inaugurated in human time. Every year for twenty centuries now, we remember this night when the kingdom of God arrived in the world, this night when Christ inaugurated the fullness of time. His birth signifies that God is walking with humans in history; we are not alone on our journey. We can hope for peace and justice and a kingdom of divine right; we can hope for something holy and far beyond earthly realities, not because we humans can create this blessing proclaimed by God's sacred words but because God is already in the midst of humanity, building a kingdom of justice and love and peace.

We are in the fullness of time which stretches from the first coming of Christ and the origins of Christianity until the second coming. Saint Paul refers to this fullness of time also (Titus 2:13), telling us that even now there should be great joy among us as we celebrate the birth of Christ twenty centuries later, but there will be even greater joy when Christ returns to crown the fullness of time. Then he will gather together all the work of his church, all the good will of Christians, all that has been sown in suffering and pain. We will all be gathered together to become the definitive kingdom that must come to fulfillment. That kingdom of justice will come. That kingdom of peace will come. Let us not be discouraged even when the horizon of history appears dark and closed off, as if human realities made it impossible for God's plans to be accomplished. God can make use of human mistakes, even of people's sins, to overcome the darkness, as Isaiah has said, so that one day the people will sing not only of the return from Babylon but of the complete liberation of humankind: «The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwell in the land of gloom a light has shone» (Isa 9:1).

On this holy night, sisters and brothers, the light that shines brilliantly in Bethlehem is a sign of our hope. Let us not be discouraged when our hope is put to the test. Let us hope against all hope and hold fast to this fullness of time. Let us live the ideal that God must make real. Christmas is a message of optimism that I want to engrave deeply in the heart of every Christian so that tonight becomes, as the divine word tells us, a night that marks the beginning of the kingdom of God that we await with confidence.

A Savior has been born to you: the Messiah, the Lord

Why do I say this? This is my second point: Christ is already building this kingdom; we human beings are not going to do this by ourselves. We have heard the beautiful description of Isaiah when he refers to Christ our Lord: «A child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulders dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever,

Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice» (Isa 9:5-6).

According to history, each time a descendant of David was anointed as his successor on the throne God had promised to maintain, these words of Isaiah were ritually pronounced as a reminder that the one who would realize God's plan was not actually the man being crowned on the throne of David; rather, this was a prophecy of one who was to come. All the kings of the Davidic dynasty had set before them an ideal that would be accomplished not by an ordinary man in history, but by the one who was both God and man, Emmanuel, God-with-us (Isa 7:14). Thus, the kings of Israel and Judah realized that they were very limited, sinful, and imperfect, and that no king or ruler could fulfill the whole of God's plan. In our days the church has been given the responsibility to criticize and analyze the kingdoms of earth and bring people to an awareness that they are still lacking in justice and peace and effectiveness. Only when Christ, the true king announced by God, becomes truly the king of all hearts will the reign that God desires become a reality. The ideal king did not appear on the throne of David until that night when the angels sang the words of the prophet: «For a child is born, and upon his shoulders is the reign of peace and justice and love» (Isa 9:5).

Only Christ can bring that about. That is why in the second reading Saint Paul defines this Christ, this Christmas, as «the glorious appearance of the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ» (Titus 2:13). On this night, sisters and brothers, we draw near to a crib that is not simply that of a child; it is the crib of a God-Child. Before this crib the words of Saint Paul should enlighten our faith and lead us to profess his divinity: «It is our great God and our Savior who is born, Jesus Christ». Accordingly, when the angels announce to the shepherds the birth of the child in Bethlehem, the gospel describes it thus: «There is born to you a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord» (Luke 2:11). Notice the three beautiful names: «There is born to you a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord». In those days when the Gospel was written, calling Jesus «Lord» was to issue a direct challenge to the idols of the earth. For Christians there is only one Lord who has been born today and whom we adore, one Lord before whom we bend our knees for there is no other lord of history or time. Christ is the Lord! Christ is the Messiah! Christ is the Savior!

What God expects of men and women

Finally, sisters and brothers, while this is God's plan and while his own Son is the one who carries it out, still he does not want to do this alone. The third thought of my Christmas message seeks to draw from the divine word what God expects of human beings. What God encounters among us is often opposition and contempt. Here in the reading from Isaiah we discover that the clouds covering those regions in darkness were the result of the outrages people were committing. But the prophet proclaimed, «The yoke that oppressed them, the pole on their shoulder, and the rod of their taskmaster you have smashed, as on the day of Midian. For every boot that tramped in battle, every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for flames» (Isa 9:3-4). It is not the triumph of human perversity that will prevail. The prophet is saying that even those who oppose God's kingdom will become instruments for revealing the splendor of God's glory, and all that is opposed to God's kingdom will become fuel for fire.

In the New Testament readings from the Gospel and Saint Paul we learn how God makes even those ignorant of Christ into instruments of his kingdom. You heard the beginning of

today's gospel: «In those days a decree went out from the emperor Augustus, and Quirinius, governor of Syria, carried out a census» (Luke 2:1-2). The rulers and great leaders of the world are God's instruments. Who was going to tell the ruler of the Roman Empire that his greatness would end here, on bended knee before the child Jesus in the manger? Who would tell the emperor Augustus that his order to carry out a census would be obeyed by Joseph and Mary of Nazareth so that Christ would fulfill the prophecy and be born in Bethlehem? All of us, without being aware of it, are God's instruments.

When people do not oppose or ignore God but consciously become God's instruments, then they are like Mary and Joseph; they are like the shepherds and the apostle Paul. So also are we Christians in the church who have received baptism and been incorporated in this holy people that Christ is forming in order to make himself present to every moment of history. We must write in our hearts the watchwords that Saint Paul presents to us today. God brings salvation, and he is teaching us to «put aside our irreligious life and our earthly desires and to live frugal and honest lives, lives filled with hope» (Titus 2:12-13).

This is God's call tonight, sisters and brothers. How I would love to draw near to your hearts and ask you to which group you belong on this holy night. To those who oppose God and sow darkness on the earth? To those who do not know Christ but are unsuspecting instruments of his kingdom, like the emperor and the great figures in the time of Christ? Rather than those, you are hopefully part of this third group, the group of the Virgin and the obedient shepherds, the group of those who respond to the Lord's call. Let us Christians be aware tonight that Christ was not born twenty centuries ago. Christ is being born today in our people and in our hearts to the degree that every Christian tries to live with integrity the Gospel, the Christian life, the standards of the true church of God. To the extent that we do this, we are like the apostle and like Mary; we are like the shepherds who give glory to God and sing with joy because they have come to know Christ; and like those humble shepherds of Bethlehem, we try to bring this news to others. To do this, a sincere conversion to Christ is necessary; we must be converted to the love that has visited us; we must echo the infinite goodness of God who brings us redemption. Let us not reject redemption! Let us not be darkness! Let our hearts be open like a cradle so that Christ can be born in each soul tonight and from there flood every heart with light. Then we will sing with the angels the news that we must bring to all people, to the whole of society, and to the whole of the nation: «Today a Savior has been born to you!» (Luke 2:11).

My sisters and brothers, with this message of God's glory and peace to humankind, I want to say to you, backed by the divine word: Merry Christmas!

Let us now proclaim in a special way our creed.