Christmas Desire

Titus 2:11 "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all."

I remember very well the Christmas it first happened. I was fourteen years old, and living with my family in Houston, Texas. We went to Midnight Mass downtown as we often did on Christmas Eve, and then we all went off to bed when we got home as it was already late. My sisters and I, though, got up very early the next morning, as children are wont to do, full of Christmas excitement and joy, so we roused our parents from their sleep, and then rushed down the stairs and patiently waited outside the Living Room doors, while my parents got things ready. My mother made coffee and put on Christmas music, while my father organized the movie camera and the awkward rack of bright lights it required in those days. Then when everything was ready, we children were allowed to rush into the room and then begin to

open our presents, one by one of course, so as to be filmed by the camera. When it was over and I had opened all my presents, I had gathered a new sweater, a blue sports coat, some mittens, a couple of pair of trousers, some shirts, and new underwear. Did you get all that: a new sweater, a blue sports coat, some mittens, a couple of pair of trousers, some shirts, and new underwear --- I got only clothes that Christmas! I got clothes and nothing else, and I was not amused. I was only fourteen years old. I got no toys, no games, no books even, just clothes. It was a passage to adulthood I guess, but I felt scarred for life. Yes, I understand now that my parents often struggled financially, and this was a clever way to buy me new clothes for my rapidly growing teenage body, while at the same time providing presents for Christmas! But I remember crying about it then, and running up to my room with adolescent tears. I remember being angry and miserable throughout Christmas dinner. I didn't care about clothes then, just as I don't really care about them now. Still apparently, I was no longer considered a child. And thus, I was doomed to receiving clothes as gifts for Christmas for the rest of my life. And so, it has been ever since.

So, what do I *really* want for Christmas, if I could have anything at all? I will tell you. I want toys again. I am tired of getting clothes and utilitarian items like fountain pens and

stationery. I want something to play with; I want something to lose myself in. I want things that whirl and buzz, with lights and sounds and action figures. I want things to get down on the floor with and spread out across the carpet. That's what I want for Christmas. Toys!

Actually, I guess I really want more than that. I want to be five years old again, if I could, at least for a day. I want to be carefree and full of that boundless energy once more. I want to play again, to play and frolic with my toys until I am exhausted by all the fun --- Then I want to be rocked asleep on the couch in my mother's arms, that's what I want, I want to feel her warm hand against my cheek again, and hear the rhythmic beating of her heart again. Then I want to be carried upstairs to my room in the strong arms of my father and tucked into bed, snug and tight, and then kissed upon my forehead, and told in no uncertain terms that I am loved and adored. That's what I want for Christmas. Isn't that what we all really want, simply to know that we are loved?

For that matter, I want to wake up in the morning to a world where all the angry people, all those bitter persons that populate our lives and our politics these days, I want to wake up in a world where they are contented instead, where they are laughing and giggling with each another, and dancing wildly in the street with joy. I want to wake up in a world where the poor

and neglected people are tenderly cared for, where the hungry are fed sumptuously, where the sorrowful are comforted, where the sick are healed, and the lonely are not lonely anymore. I want to wake up in a world where there is an end to wars and fighting, where there is no more pain or sorrow, where there are no longer tears in the eyes of children, no more wailing and laments sounded by orphans and widows, a world instead where the lion lays down with the lamb and eats straw like the ox. I want to wake up in a world where there is peace on earth and goodwill among mankind.

And isn't that what Christmas is really all about, those universal human yearnings of ours for a better life, for salvation from the pain and sorrows of this one, our common longings to be kissed upon the forehead and reassured that we are loved and adored. Isn't Christmas about how this current state of affairs of misery and pain, this vale of tears, is not the way God wants our lives to be either, that God hears our cries, knows our plight, and has responded to our needs? That God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him shall never die.

Perhaps more than any other holiday, Christmas is a season designed to reassure us that we *are* loved. Far more than any other celebration, Christmas has built tradition upon tradition to express some measure of that desire for love and peace. The

spirit of this season is so powerful, so infectious even, that whether one is religious or not, every one of us seems to get caught up in the activities of this festival. Why? Because the common theme tying the vast array of differing activities now associated with Christmas is our universal longing to know that we are cherished and beloved, where so many of the activities of this season are designed simply to draw us all together within the bonds of our common humanity, the office parties, the family and friends gathered around a meal together, the exchange of gifts and cards, the midnight worship service. No one should be alone or unloved at Christmas, for such, strikes against the very *raison d'être* of the season. This is not a holiday to be uncared for.

Thus, Christmas has amongst all of our many religious festivals become so popular and so important. Tonight, around the world, almost two and a half billion Christians will be celebrating Christmas. The stories of Jesus' birth are the source of the world's most widely observed religious holiday. Almost twice as many Christians are celebrating Christmas this year as there are in the next largest religion, which is Islam. Indeed, more Christians celebrate this feast than any of the other Christian holidays, including Easter Sunday, the Day of the Resurrection. Moreover, because of the cultural and commercial importance of this holiday in Western society and now

beyond, Christmas is observed by a huge number of non-Christians as well. For example, there are widespread Christmas celebrations in India, a country where Christians represent less than 3% of the population, and yet Christmas is a national holiday there! Indeed, no other religious festival in all the world is so widely commemorated by individuals who are outside of the religious tradition that originated it, because at the very heart of the Christmas story is the reassurance that God loves us, loves all of us. We see ourselves in the Christ child and in his story. So many parts of the narrative resonant within our common human experience, the joyful expectation of pregnant Mary, the awe and wonder of birth itself, the warmth and coziness of the humble stable, the infant suckling at his mother's breast, the longing amazement of the humble shepherds, the grandeur and majesty of the wise men, and the glorious harmony of the angelic chorus. So many of the elements of this story strike a chord with us and with our emotions. We find ourselves drawn again and again into the story, each element as an entry point for us to become a part of the narrative, to identify ourselves within it, to find that longed for love expressed and real. That is what we celebrate at Christmas. The message of this season is that God loves us.

That the child born in Bethlehem is, in some sense, a fulfillment of those longings, a promise of another way, the

hope of a new beginning, a light shining in the darkness, the herald of some other kingdom, and a different kind of life. We sit here in the darkness of this night to proclaim our longing to be loved and adored, and God responds.

So let us join then with those shepherds and go again to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened. Let us add our voices together with the throngs of the faithful around the globe and throughout the ages, and proclaim with them, and with one and another, our thanks and praise to God, to our Father in heaven, for this great thing that has happened, that Christ is born amongst us, born for us, and by that event we know that we are indeed loved and adored. AMEN.