

Your Bethlehem... A journey to Simplicity

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We do not know if it was a stable or a cave above the little town of Bethlehem that first greeted Jesus. We do not know all the struggles that Mary must have gone through at the time that for expectant parents would be a time of joy. Yet the Son of God made man was coming as a tiny baby to open a path out of the wilderness of darkness, despair, and sorrow to joy and overwhelming peace. A journey that was to comply with the request of an occupying army, Roman, and was to fulfil the prophecy that the land of Judah was to provide the Messiah. A 'journey' too for the Mother of this baby, her fiat, the way to travel. A journey in obedience for St Joseph, perhaps the most demanding of all, for he had the responsibility in total mystery and unknowing, of looking after Mary and her child conceived in such an inexplicable way.

But like all journeys the truest journeys are the journeys to the heart. Unless we travel inwards to the depth of our heart and soul we cannot undertake the journeys of life with their ups and downs, sickness and health, births and bereavements, joys and sorrows with the peace of heart that the birth of that Child of Bethlehem came to grant us. We speak much of Christmas peace and the happiness of such a time (not indeed for all for it can be a time, testing and a lonely time for too many), but Christmas is about new life and birth and Love Divine and a journey of Hope. The following carol says it beautifully:

*Hear the angelic Chorus a proclamation glorious,
heralding the birth of a King.*

*Hallelujahs sounding, sweet mystery surrounding
we celebrate this gift and we sing*

Welcome the Son of God, we welcome Him.

Now we welcome this Royal Child,

Love Devine, we rejoice in the hope He brings.

- Jackie Jones 1997

As we travel towards Christmas Advent is both our preparation for this great feast but also a reminder of all that the coming of the Messiah foretold.

We have a mini reminder of much of the great truths and mysteries of our faith. We hear of the prophecies of The Old Testament and of prophets such as Isaiah so prominent in Advent. We are reminded of Mary's life and her family, Elizabeth and Zachary, of St John the Baptist, and the Angel's role. We are reminded of the first and second coming of Jesus.

But why was this Infant King born in such a humble place? Why did Mary and Joseph have to undergo such a journey? Today we have many refugees and displaced persons. The Middle East has changed dramatically over the past years and Christians are now so persecuted as were the Christians of the early days of the Church in those lands. But they too will celebrate the birth of Jesus with joy and with perhaps little material things to take away the anguish and strife of living in refugee camps. But perhaps they are blessed, to be able, like Mary, to travel light and with little baggage. They will be blessed for their endurance and determination in remembering Bethlehem.

But what of Bethlehem itself? Again a place that is caught in conflict – behind a wall that divides Arab, Israeli and Christian and a war zone. The Church of the Nativity often acting as a place of refuge for those trying to escape rockets and gunfire! The word Bethlehem means the 'house of bread'! In Hebrew Beth-lehem is two words and means 'house' (Beth as in Beth-el, 'house of God') and 'bread' (lehem) surely a good place of refuge.

It is easy to in the material celebration of Advent, 'a coming', and Christmas, to forget what we are really celebrating and not join in that stable of simplicity and determined peace-making and peace filling which Jesus came to instil in the hearts of Mankind. Did He not say "Blessed are the Peacemakers for they shall be called the Sons of God"? 'Peacemaker' a fitting title for Jesus Himself surely. Bethlehem should stand as a reproach and a reminder of what we are celebrating. We are celebrating the peace that the



world cannot give. It is that interior peace that springs from Hope – hope in eternity, hope in salvation, hope in comfort and strife and that no matter what happens nothing can separate us from the Love that Jesus has for us. The Babe of Bethlehem is often depicted with his little arms extended. Those arms remained extended – to the very end, always open, always nurturing and open to all. Christmas should be time not of ‘sugary sweetness’ but a journey to remind us that we are all brothers and sisters and that we have to extend our arms and hearts to **all** around us and live simply and lovingly. I am always moved by that Christmas in World War 1 when all fighting stopped so that the soldiers could have a brief respite from killing. This, though moving, is also sad- they could not fight at this great feast but could continue. But Christmas should be a strengthening of that interior peace that ‘fights’ for that Bethlehem peace which becomes so deeply ingrained that it enables us to live in it and share it especially with those with whom we share our lives.



We should be willing to have that Bethlehem moment, the realisation of the poverty and simplicity which the Lord encountered at His birth. Maybe our gift to each other would then be gratitude, blessing, peace and joy. Yes they could still be expressed in material things but underpinned with true purpose and gladness.

In 1987 in a first visit to Medjugorje, still then under communist rule, I and my family were turfed out of a local person's house (at that time there were no hotels or guest houses), in favour of an American couple who could or would pay more. This was to the great distress of the host. She then quietly and secretly put us all up in a stable, sheets on straw and all. The family thought this was wonderful and exciting. I was both grateful but also reflective. What a fitting way to spend a pilgrimage. This was indeed a journey from Bethlehem in Palestine, to Bethlehem on Pilgrimage, to Bethlehem of the Heart. This taught me that no matter where one is there can be joy and that simplicity can lead to peace and hospitality of the heart.

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So this Advent and Christmas seek that Bethlehem- that stable of simplicity so that Christmas leads to a lasting joy and deep peace and true happiness.

On behalf of the Apostolate I wish you all a blessed and peace filled Christmas.

Halina Holman.



POPE FRANCIS 1

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Today, on the First Sunday of Advent, we begin a new liturgical year; that is, a new journey of the People of God with Jesus Christ, our Shepherd, who guides us through history toward the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, this day has a special charm, it makes us experience deeply the meaning of history. We rediscover the beauty of all being on a journey: the Church, with her vocation and mission, and all humanity, peoples, civilizations, cultures, all on a journey across the paths of time. But where are we journeying? Is there a common goal? And what is this goal? This journey never comes to an end. Just as in each of our lives we always need to begin again, to get up again, to rediscover the meaning of the goal of our lives, so also for the great human family it is always necessary to rediscover the common horizon toward which we are journeying. *The horizon of hope!* This is the horizon that makes for a good journey. The season of Advent, which we begin again today, restores this horizon of hope, a hope which does not disappoint for it is founded on God's Word. A hope which does not disappoint, simply because the Lord never disappoints! He is faithful! He does not disappoint! Let us think about and feel this beauty. Rome 2013

Papal Prayer for December 2014

General Intention: Christmas, hope for humanity. That the birth of the Redeemer may bring peace and hope to all people of good will.

Missionary Intention: Parents. That parents may be true evangelists, passing on to their children the precious gift of faith.

Feast Days in December

Advent Sundays: 31st (Nov), 7th 14th 21st

3rd St Francis Xavier. 6th St Nicholas.

Wednesday 24th Christmas Eve

Thursday 25th Christmas Day. 26th St Stephen

28th Holy Family 29th St Thomas à Becket

Blessings for Christmas to all

