

HOMILY FOR CHRISTMAS DAY-DECEMBER 25, 2020

READINGS: Isaiah 52: 7-10;

Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 98:

Hebrew 1: 1-6;

Gospel of Luke 2: 1-16

Christmas: The spirit of love and hope

Did you put up a Christmas tree this year? One of the popular traditional images of Christmas is the Christmas tree. Putting up a Christmas tree is a tradition that leads us into the spirit of Christmas. Every year before Christmas Day arrives, we put up Christmas trees in our churches, schools, our places of work, in the shopping malls and in our homes. The City of Toronto puts up a beautiful, tall and nicely decorated Christmas tree on Queen Street in front of the old City Hall. This year Christmas tree farmers across Canada and the United States of America have reported an increase in demand for Christmas trees. According to Shirley Brennan, the Executive Director of Christmas tree Farmers of Ontario, the demand for Christmas trees has spiked beyond their expectations amid COVID-19 pandemic. The farmers have observed that, every year there is an increase in demand for the evergreen tree. But, this year the demand has been greater than the farmers had anticipated. The farmers attribute the increased demand to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, it is reported that a larger number of people are putting up a real Christmas tree for the first time. Why is there an increased demand for Christmas trees? As we find ourselves being restricted to our homes due to the COVID-19 pandemic's safety protocols, we have come to see the traditional Christmas tree in a way that we might not have not done in the past. With so many uncertainties and challenges surrounding the pandemic, the Christmas tree has been reported to be a symbol of hope and life to many in this difficult time.

Today is Christmas. Today we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Today we celebrate God's gift of hope and life to his people. As our Advent journey comes to an end, we have replaced the Advent wreath and its candles with Christmas trees decorated with lights. On this beautiful day the Church has provided us with readings inviting us to reflect on the spiritual significance of Christmas to us.

We begin with the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. The writer of this part of the Book of Isaiah is referred to as the "Third" Isaiah who lived at the time of the return of the exiles from Babylon. The passage begins with a proclamation setting a tone of hope and peace: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces, who brings good news, who announces salvation". In the Bible, a "mountain" symbolizes a location of the presence of God.

The return of the exiles to their homeland had been very difficult and painful. The people had to begin all over again: they had to rebuild their lives. Isaiah's prophecy to his people was to assure them that God was still with them and that God would keep all the promises of his covenant. Isaiah told the people: "your God reigns" meaning that God

would be their God and they would be the people of God. The prophecy was a message of comfort and hope to the Israelites. Isaiah's proclamation of God's salvation was joyous news to the returned exiles.

The prophecy of Isaiah in the first reading forms the backdrop of the Gospel reading from Luke. Today's Gospel passage about the birth of Jesus is a "birth narrative". In the Bible, birth narratives are stories about the birth of someone who later became great. According to biblical scholars, the story was composed, not to describe a birth exactly as it occurred, but to teach the significance of that person's birth, as it is later understood in the light of subsequent events. Today's passage teaches that Jesus is divine and was born to save the world.

The vivid birth narrative gives us some insight into the type of Saviour that Jesus would be. The baby was born during the time of the Roman occupation in the Holy Land symbolizing a time of injustice and oppression of God's people. The baby was born in a place where cows and goats were kept because there was no suitable place for Mary to deliver the baby. This highlighted a time of homelessness and insecurity. The message of the birth was first given to shepherds who were considered poor and of low social status. These three events of the birth of the Saviour reveal the humble beginnings of a baby born as King and Saviour. The events identified Jesus as a humble servant of God born to bring good news to the poor and the oppressed. Our scriptures tell us that the newborn baby is the image of the invisible God, the Father. Jesus is the firstborn of all creation and through him all things were created (Colossians 1: 15-16). The identity of Jesus is what the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews talks about in the second reading. The second reading is the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews. The writer described Jesus as a reflection of God's glory and Jesus is far superior to the angels. In this Letter the writer reminded the early Christians who were mostly of Jewish background about the mission of Jesus. Jesus came to reconcile us to God.

So, what is the meaning of Christmas for today's Church? What is this celebration really about? What makes Christmas so special in the spiritual life of a Christian? Our celebration of Christmas reminds us of that particular moment in which God came to our world as the Incarnate God of love. We celebrate the coming of God to dwell among his people. Today we are reminded that God chose to come and dwell with us in the person of his Son, Jesus. Our belief in Jesus binds all of us together: men and women of every race, language, tribe and nation.

Every Christmas is a time of great joy. We do everything to make Christmas a time of great celebration. However, this Christmas is different because of the pandemic. To help prevent the spread of the virus, we have rightly been restricted from doing things we love to do at Christmas. We might have a feeling that our Christmas spirit has been dampened by the pandemic. We might have had the tendency of not putting up a Christmas tree. But Christmas will always be Christmas.

This year the Christmas tree has helped us to focus on what is important in our lives- life itself. During this pandemic, we have read beautiful stories about so many people whose work has brought us hope and life to others. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we

have also learned to be patient, to understand each other, to support each other and to keep each other safe. All these actions are signs of hope and life-- symbolized by the Christmas tree.

What does our celebration of Christmas offer us? As Christians, the celebration of the birth of our Saviour reminds us of our call to live our lives in the spirit of the Gospel. Our celebration reminds us to continue to be the messengers of good news through our actions based on our faith. Jesus came into the world as an act of love. Through our actions based on our faith in Jesus we are encouraged to share joy, love, hope and peace found in Jesus. As we sit around or in front of our Christmas trees at home or in the church, let us reflect on the true meaning of Christmas. Christmas is the time to be charitable. Christmas is the time to reach out to those in need with love. This is the spirit of Christmas.

I wish you and your families a Christmas full of joy, hope, love and life.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

Please note: The homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance.