



Christmas 2011

Dear Christian,

Merry Christmas to you and yours! This is such a magical time: memories of childhood, traditions new and old, twinkling lights and fantastic treats... people even hope for snow! As we celebrate the birthday of Jesus, we learn to believe in miracles. A simple woman becomes the Mother of God. Shepherds are sung to by angels. Wise men see a king where others see merely a poor family. Suddenly, God has a human face. These simple stories touch on the meaning of the universe. What can we learn by meditating on the Christmas message?

During the Advent season I had a moment that taught me about the meaning of Christmas. I was celebrating a baptism during Mass, and at the end of the baptism I held up the baby for everyone to see. The baby held out his arms wide to the world. He looked just like Baby Jesus from the manger scene! Suddenly it dawned on me what this gesture means. When a child does it they are usually asking for a hug. It says, "I love you! Won't you love me?"

So, God spent years preparing the Jewish people, humbled Himself to become a human being, just to hold His hands out to the world? Yes, because this simple gesture is Jesus' first sermon. He says in an unmistakable way: "I love you." We look for the "meaning of life" as though it were something hard to find. We dream of everything, even the hard moments, having a purpose. We dream of someone who loves and cares for us. The Good News is that "I love you" is written across the universe from the stars in the sky to the cells in our body. But the message wasn't getting through, so God sent his Son. Jesus is God's love made visible for us. God is not a tyrant or a slave driver or a master; God is a loving Father. We are his children. But still the message doesn't get through. Even though we have heard "God loves us," we don't live it (we should at least be much less stressed if we believed it). I think we miss the Good News for three basic reasons:

- **We get distracted.** Life is full of activities, opportunities, and things we say yes to because we feel guilty. When we have a spare moment, instead of praying we switch on the TV or the computer. The Inn had no room to welcome Jesus because it was too full – just like our lives. The humble stable had space for Almighty God. Sometimes we don't begin to realize the meaning of the universe until our lives start to stink like a stable. Sometimes we have to be emptied of everything else before we begin to discover that only God's love really matters.

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us
and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.
Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:10-11)

- **We refuse to believe it is true.** Many of us accept on a superficial level that God loves us, but we don't let that reality penetrate into the places in our life where we bury our fears and failures. We don't give God enough credit. Zechariah didn't really believe he was going to have a son (Luke 1). Like him we think that God really is not going to help us. Christmas is not just for everyone else; Christmas is for you.
- **There are forces in the world that will stop at nothing to keep you from discovering that you are loved.** King Herod is not only afraid of the Baby, but he is willing to massacre innocent children to get rid of Him. Jesus is the light of the world, and the darkness hates the light (John 1). There are people and things that want to keep you enslaved to your fears, cravings and vices. They don't want you to discover the freedom of God's love.

The Baby born in Bethlehem really does reveal the secret of the universe: "I love you." The Catholic Church seems to have a lot of strange teachings, and they seem strange to us because they only make sense if the Christmas story is true. Why does the Church insist that we pray daily? To stay friends with the One who loves us. Why does the Church say we have to come to Mass on Sunday? To be fed by the One who loves us. Why does the Church have Confession? So we can come back to God's love when we have failed. Why do we keep celebrating Christmas for two more weeks? Because we love God so much, and are so excited to welcome His Son.

This Christmas season is all about giving. But the first gift was not the kind of thing that fits in a box or under a tree. The first gift was the gift of Love made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you have had a moment when you caught a glimpse of God's infinite, unconditional love for you. Unfortunately, we usually walk away and go right back to our daily lives. This is why Christians gather every Sunday. We need to be reminded on a weekly basis of God's love for us. It is no mistake that when Jesus was born He was laid in a manger. He has come to make Himself our food! Through the Eucharist we can each receive and cradle the Baby Jesus. We welcome the God-with-us. We receive the great "I love you!" and respond with our own, "I love You, too!"

Come, let us adore Him!

Fr. Joel