

## A Mantle of Praise

Some say that Christmas is canceled this year. It is true that we will miss some important elements of our Christmas celebrations such as large family and friends' gatherings at Church and at home. But is that the core of Christmas? I am convinced this year we should celebrate Christmas more than ever. Why? Because most probably many of us have never lived in a world with such a desperate need for a Savior. But let's get practical. How can we get rid of the chills of fear and warm up our hearts with love and peace to welcome our newborn Savior? How can we share him in joy with a world wrapped in mourning?

Look at the Gospels, what do they teach us about those who did welcome our Savior on the first Christmas? At that times, things were also not looking good for the People of Israel, oppressed under the domination of the Roman Empire. But those who were surprised by the wonder of the newborn Messiah, both angels and shepherds, broke out in praise: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" (Luke 2:20). Should we not do the same? Can we sing with our lives "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased"? (Luke 2:14) Praise filled up the sky and the hearts of the poor on the first Christmas night. Praise remains the best way of celebrating Christmas, this year and always.

Don't think that the value of the prayer of praise has always been clear to me. For years I didn't make much of the affirmation that we, as human beings, were created to give glory to God. God doesn't need our glory, does he? And anyhow, can we truly give him glory, as troubled and broken as we are? I was more or less aware that at every Mass, we join the angels in their constant praise of God when we sing the "Holy, holy." If it is a Sunday or solemnity, we also sing the "Gloria", again, more praise. Have you ever asked yourself why we do this? Why is it so important as part of the liturgy and prayer of the Church and why it is meant to be a central piece in our personal prayer and your life as a whole?

During the last months I have been meditating over chapter 61 of the book of the prophet Isaiah. The Lord has blessed me abundantly through these words of comfort and mission that Jesus made his own when He spoke to his contemporaries in the synagogue of Capernaum in these words:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. (Luke 4: 18-21)*

Jesus is the anointed one, the Messiah. Through his incarnation, he has become one of us, Emmanuel, God with us. During this Advent, I could almost hear as I prayed the clamor of the earth crying out for a Savior. Our God always hears the cry of the poor, and he has come. He has come! We can be tempted to think that, yes, he comes every Christmas, moreover, every day in the Eucharist, even at every instant when we call him. Truly, he never leaves us, we are the ones who abandon him. But still, this Christmas is a new event, because our world needs a Savior now, a Savior for our present reality, for you and me as we are today. Moreover, through the power of the Holy Spirit, present in our liturgical celebrations, Christmas remains a single but ever new event in our history. It's not the repetition of something that happened in the past. No! It is one reality mysteriously stretched in time so that you and I can benefit from it: be transformed, renewed, saved, on THIS Holy Night.

Oh, what a great joy! Not the superficial happiness that comes and goes depending on the turn of events. No, this is the joy that Jesus promises, the joy that nothing can take from us. Would not this be the best Christmas

gift? But while joy is a gift from the Holy Spirit, how can we let it grow strong and develop deep roots that will prevent it from withering in times of drought and hardship? How can our joy, like the mustard seed in our hearts, spread out with new branches that will give shelter to others? The answer is praise. Isaiah chapter 61 verse 3 says:

*to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the **oil of gladness** instead of mourning, the **mantle of praise** instead of a faint spirit.*

Don't we all suffer at times from having a faint spirit? Then we need to be covered in a mantle of praise to keep the warmth of love and joy in our hearts and be able to share it with others. This is why God desires our praise, not for his sake but for our sake. He knows that when we praise him our eyes are on him instead of on ourselves, and, ah, when our eyes are on him, we can do all things in him who comforts us (Philippians 4:13) When we glorify God, as Mary did in the Magnificat, we learn and share with others what really matters and our hearts become more and more like his, like Jesus'. Praise is not blind to suffering, but it proclaims that all healing and power come from the Lord, because God is always greater. Oh, how important this is! Praise dries out in our hearts when we forget that God and not us—not me—is the Lord of history. Yes, there are many moments when I don't understand what he is doing. But why I am so surprised about this fact? Have I forgotten that he is BIG and I am small; he is my Father and I his little daughter?

"I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Matthew 11:25). We can see Jesus praising the Father at very significant moments of his public ministry, but this praise was always ringing in his heart, like a constant love song. Following the Benedictine tradition, at our monastery, we probably devote more time than any other Order to the praise of God in the chanting and careful celebration of the Divine Office, the Liturgy of the Hours. Our community prayer is the continuation of the love song resounding in the heart of Christ at all times, a love song to his Father in intercession for each one of us. As we pray and sing, the Spirit of Jesus prays within us. We become one in him, one with the Church, his Body, offering ourselves for the salvation of many; an open channel to receive his salvation and pour it like soft rain over the dry land of humankind. I can imagine, as we pray in the silent of the night, a mantle of praise being spread over the world to shelter it from harm, as the mantle of our Blessed Mother enfolds and protects all her children.

So much could be said of this school of prayer which frees me from an understanding of prayer that can easily be so self-centered. Through the Divine Office I enter in communion with the joys and sorrows, trials and victories of all humanity through the ages, and this communion remains and is extended to my personal prayer and the rest of my day, where I also give glory to God through the work of my mind and body in hidden ordinary works of love and service. Under the humble character of this constant prayer that sanctifies our days, each time we make a profound bow as we are pronouncing the words of the doxology after each psalm, our human condition acknowledges the right relationship with our Creator, "not to us Lord, but to your name give the glory" (Psalm 115:1). Beautiful praise is the ripe fruit of gratitude and love, and a most contagious form of joy. As our world lives in fear of the spread of CoVid, the spread of suffering with names and faces, the spread of division, let us spread the *Good News*, uniting heaven and earth in a single hymn of praise, the song of the redeemed, the poem of those in love with our *God with us*, Emmanuel, the Newborn Baby who waits for the warm mantle of our praise. Let us meet before the manger in silence and song, in hope and supplication, in unending praise for HE HAS COME.

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