

A Great Joy for All People (Christmas Eve 2016)

*Good people all, this Christmas time,
consider well and bear in mind,
what our good God for us has done
in sending his beloved Son.
With Mary holy, we should pray
to God with love this Christmas Day.
In Bethlehem upon that morn
there was a blessed Messiah born.*

These lyrics from a very old Celtic song, the Wexford Carol, go on to tell how the woman and her guide were repelled from every door; and that shepherds, fearful at the angel's appearance are nonetheless coaxed by the messenger to go to Bethlehem:

*With thankful heart and joyful mind,
the shepherds went the babe to find.*

It is the joy of the shepherds, which the angel announced as a great joy for all people, it is this joy that I ask us to consider this evening.

Joy is defined as a feeling of great pleasure and happiness; a state of mind, an orientation of the heart—delight, jubilation, exultation; rejoicing.

Joy is our birthright. Joy animates our lives. We are made for joy. Joy is our desire and our contentment. Joy is not a fleeting feeling, a pleasure or even happiness which is often dependent on external circumstances. And it is possible to be joyful even in the face of our daily troubles, whatever those troubles may be.

Joyful, Joyful we adore Thee O God; and full of joy we can be with others. Joy is the dynamic, the dynamo of the Incarnation we celebrate tonight.

“Joy does not save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. Yet because of joy—and our adopting a certain perspective about life because of joy—we can face sufferings in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken” (*The Book of Joy*).

These words by Archbishop Desmond Tutu along with His Holiness the Dalai Lama provide a wonderful Christmas read. Perhaps, you can use one of your gift cards to purchase *The Book of Joy*.

The authors go on to point out that many of the things that undermine our joy, we create ourselves. But they are equally quick to say that we also have the ability to create more joy. For the ultimate source of joy is within us—our approach to the world, our attitudes and perspectives.

Within us—Joy dwells within us.

And we can become dwellings of joy for others; a flesh and blood crèche.

Good people all, this Christmas time, coming into the world in which we live right now, can help us with our attitude and focus on joy. To do so we need to be more concerned with this celebration of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit: announced to Mary who carried joy within, the Shepherds who witnessed and experienced the joy come in the babe; the Magi who would cross culture and geography, drawn to the joy we all desire; and the angels whose song of glory was, itself, joy amplified.

The joy we experience cannot be harbored. The shepherds say let's go tell others, let's praise and share the joy.

You cannot store joy, like money for a rainy day account. But what does get stored up and fortified is your ability to be a source of joy—reframing your life situations more positively, expressing gratitude more readily, and your choosing to be kind and generous with others. Again, these are the dynamics of joy within a person—the joy that can and does build bridges between people, the joy that fills this world with more joy.

All this might be hard to believe in our world of Aleppos, assassinations, terror, political intrigue and duplicity, fear and unrest. And this litany of lament could go on, we know it too well. What we also know but under these conditions need to be reminded is that God's greatest joy is to give us the Son, Jesus Christ—our love, our hope, our joy. And our greatest joy, in a reflection of God's glory but also as an authentic act on each of our parts, is when we seek to do good for others. This is the gift-giving basis of our Christmas celebration; but more, it is how we are made. We are wired to be compassionate; and, when we do act compassionately, we light up the world.

Not money, not fame, not power—rather, it is our generosity of spirit with others that lights up the world. The star of wonder, star of light was a beacon to joy. Mary, Joseph, Shepherds, and Kings: they knew it. We know it too, with our heads and with our hearts. Joy to the World is God's gift to the world, in Jesus who gives himself to others—Joy, so that joy might dwell within you, that you might share that joy with others—more Joy: A virtuous cycle, not a vicious cycle.

So, it is possible not just on Christmas but every day, that with love to God we pray all people may wake to this great joy. What does it take? A lot! A lot of time, energy and practice. Joy is learned. "Being on this earth is a time for us to learn to be good, to learn to be more loving, to learn to be more compassionate", writes the Dalai Lama. "And we really learn", adds Desmond Tutu, "when something happens that tests you" (*The Book of Joy*). Then, even our experiences of suffering and confusion can become wellsprings of insight and energy for joy.

For too long our social and cultural mantra has been about how far we have come and with technology how connected we are. But now, in this country, we are experiencing how disconnected we are. How can we minimize the worry we are experiencing? Whereas fear fuels a threat; faith faces a challenge. Fear builds walls,

which in turn reinforce difference, worry and fear. Faith seeks understanding, bridging, and a connection with others as the way forward. Instead of flight—recoiling back, burying your head in the sand to avoid reality—or fight—we are better, we are stronger, we will win—we invite others into joy. This is our time of testing, prepared for in Bethlehem upon that morn when our blest messiah was born.

Yes, we need be realistic about what people do, how bad things get. But we need remember and recognize that despite the terrible aberrations, the fundamental thing about humanity, about people, is that they are good, they were made good, and they really want to be good (*The Book of Joy*). People are born desiring joy and contentment. Let us be part of the rescue and redemption of this birthright, this great joy for all people.

Joy must train our vigilance, clarify our vision and animate our actions.
We practice and exercise joy by rejoicing—gathering, singing, praying, going out.
Rejoicing predisposes us to repeat good deeds in the future.
Joy is the replicating dynamic in God's Creation.
Joy is contagious Incarnation.

And now, may your Christmastime be an experience of the joy that is truly God's embrace of all that is. May we all be reminded that we carry within us the capacity for joy which renews and builds up all creation.
May we celebrate and share this joy with those we love.
And let us go out offering this joy and love to others in need.
Quite a manger scene indeed.
Amen.

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