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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC **December 25, 2019**
Solemnity of Christmas 2019 **Is 9:1-6, Lk 2:1-14**

When a mother or father gazes into the eyes of their newborn child, one of the questions they might ask themselves is, "What kind of world will my baby grow up in? What will life be like for him, for her, years from now?" "How can I prepare him, how can I equip her with the challenges he/she will face?" This Christmas all of us, whether we be parents or not, are asked to look into the face of the Christ Child, and we are invited to use our imagination to ask ourselves, "What kind of world do I want to live in? What kind of world will I try to create by the choices I make, by the priorities I set, by the values I say I try to live by?" The Christmas story, with which we are so familiar, with its cast of angels and shepherds, of a young couple forced to sleep in a stable, is one that is easily sentimentalized, easily evacuated of its original meaning. Entangled with memories of Christmas pageants from school days long ago, it is danger of remaining something like a childhood fairytale, disconnected from the real world that we have to face every day. The Christmas story is given to us not so much to charm us, as to challenge us.

Let us return to the familiar Christmas story to mine its message, so that we might reflect on how it can speak to us today. St. Luke, who narrates the version of Christ's birth with which we are most familiar, is presenting us with a choice. We can live in the world and ask why, how come, why are things the way they are, or we can ask why not, why not imagine a world, a society, where people try to live the message Jesus taught, the message of justice and compassions, and then move to create that world, a society wherein all peoples can flourish, and not just a relative few at the expense of the many.

Because we are unfamiliar with the historical setting that frames the story of Christ's birth, we may miss the nuances, the references, the allusions that work together to present the challenge that the Gospel offers to us. Words like "son of God," "savior," "legions of angels," "a message of peace," for us all have a religious, a spiritual, even an otherworldly reference. Yet in the time that Luke wrote his gospel, most people would see these words as having instead a secular reference, directed to the emperor Caesar Augustus. These are the words inscribed on Roman coins hailing Caesar as "son of God," even as "savior," because his military legions had brought an era of peace, a period known as the "Pax Romana." For the first time ever, merchant ships could sail the Mediterranean without threat of being attacked by pirates. All the nations that ringed that sea lived in harmony with each other. Caesar had indeed brought peace, but it was a peace realized by the centurion's boot and sword. As the

Roman historian, Tacitus, described the conquest of Britain, "They create a desert, and call it peace." To commemorate this achievement Caesar Augustus built a monument called the "Ara Pacis," the "Altar of Peace," dedicated to Mars, the god of war. Caesar's reign of peace was one that brought devastation in its wake.

The angelic hosts (legions) singing, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests," announce a much different kind of peace than that of the Roman emperor, one not imposed from outside, but created from within when human beings are empowered to see each other as neighbors, even as potential brothers and sisters, certainly not as enemies. The babe in the manger is hailed as "Son of God," as "Prince of Peace," as "Savior," but He arrives not with the trappings of a powerful monarch as to intimidate, but in humility and simplicity inviting us to become more than what we are right now. The Son of God became like us that we might become like Him--kind, compassionate, generous, forgiving. The first who come to adore Him are the shepherds. At that time they were not thought of as the kind of people you would want to invite into your home. Rather, they were the kind for whom you would lock your door when you saw them coming. They were viewed with suspicion and mistrust. They were "the Other," and yet they are the first to be welcomed by Mary and Joseph.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims, "The people who walked in darkness has seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in a land of gloom a light has shone" That passage is read at Midnight Mass not to speak of something that has happened in the past, but as something that continues to happen whenever people hear the word of the Messiah, God's anointed one, and put His teaching into practice. There is certainly much darkness around. Peace seems to escape us. We are living through a period of seemingly endless wars, prosecuted for decades on a program of lies, ignorance, incompetence, not to mention greed, perpetrated by administrations, both Democratic and Republican. And nobody seems to care, because it is other people's kids getting killed, people in nations far away being slaughtered, and the bill will come due to be paid by future generations. People who want to come to this nation, simply to escape violence in their own, are demonized and often treated in conditions not worthy of a human being. They have become the new Other, the ones to be feared as a supposed threat to our way of life.

The challenge is presented to us to walk in the light, the light provided by the message of Jesus Christ, and not to be complicit with the forces of darkness that threaten to overwhelm our world, our society—the forces of the military-industrial-entertainment complex. Our Christmas celebration should be one not of sentimentality, nor of indulgence in all the materialistic aspects of this "holiday season." Rather, it

should be a moment of rededication to the message of Jesus, to walk in the light, to remember what is that we are supposed to be all about. Then, we will not only "walk in the light," but be as "light to the world."