

Holy Mass for Christmas Day
Venice, Basilica of St Mark, December 25th 2023
Homily given by the Patriarch Francesco Moraglia

Dearly beloved

At Christmas mankind's wish to see God is fulfilled.

On Christmas night the words of the prophet Isaiah ring out: *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined"* (Isaiah 9:2). We find the same theme in the Apostle Paul's epistle to Titus: *"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age"* (Tt 2, 11-12).

This desire to see God has been in the prayers of the people of Israel from the very beginning, and it is frequently to be found in the Psalms. Psalm 105 (104), for example, reads: *"Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice! Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually"* (vv 3-4). Psalm 24 (23) lists the conditions which are necessary to be able to "see" God, for whoever wishes to enter the holy dwelling of the Lord; it speaks of *"clean hands and a pure heart"* (v 4) and concludes in the following verse: *"Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob"* (v 6).

Seeking the face of God, turning towards him, is something which is common to all humanity but only just people can hope to truly encounter the Lord.

The two psalms cited above evoke the entrance into the sanctuary, the procession bearing the ark into the temple; the cultural context is clear: you encounter the Lord in the temple – and here a passage in the second chapter of John's Gospel can help us, when Jesus affirms: *"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up"*, and John notes: *"But he was speaking about the temple of his body"* (John 2:19,21).

The Gospel for Christmas Day revisits this theme with the mystical theological elements which are characteristic of John's Gospel; the prologue (John 1:1-18) is the synthesis and the key to understanding the whole of the fourth Gospel. In particular, the initial and final words deliver the greatness of Christmas and the fulfilment which follows the time of waiting.

These words lead us back to that *"beginning"* (v 1) which stands for eternity in which there is only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God and the Word which is with God. Until this moment, all this was distant and unknown: *"No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known"* (v 18).

How did the Son reveal the Father? The prologue tells us this too: *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"* (v 14). Just before this we read *"He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him"* (v 11).

The drama of Christmas is immediately evident. The Holy Child is not pure poetry, he is not just joy: on him falls the drama of human history, the drama of those who do not want to receive him.

To want to see God, to be able to meet him only in his sanctuary, with innocent hands and a pure heart: these are the conditions that mankind was not able to achieve by himself, neither within nor outside the covenant.

Humankind was not able to encounter God, and this is seen in the Old Testament in the people who – for the hardness of their hearts, for their unfaithfulness, and for their inability to respect what had been prescribed – had to continue to renew the covenants, though within the unique Covenant between God and humanity. From Noah onwards, by way of Abraham, Moses and the prophets, we reach the New Covenant because of man's incapacity to meet God and live in a relationship with him.

The Hebrew word *panim* is used in the Old Testament: it refers to the face of living creatures and the face of God; God is beginning to reveal himself as a person. The Old Testament denied the possibility for people to fashion images of God – who cannot be represented, just as he cannot be possessed – but it is well aware, especially in the Psalms – of the desire to seek his face.

The impotence behind this seeking the face of God, however, opens to the reality of God as person and relationship. Alongside the term *panim* we find another Hebrew word, *shem*, which means "name", and which refers to being in a relationship. It is a relationship which, in its turn, generates other relationships and which is the only one which can heal broken relations between people.

The dramatic events of the dramatic period we are currently living in are about geopolitics but also about personal relationships. Not only the war in Ukraine, the end of which is not in sight; there is also the war which is causing bloodshed in the Holy Land - where the birth and life of Jesus took place – and where two peoples, who both acknowledge the God of Abraham, are at war while the world is unable to find a solution for a just peace after too many years of war and hatred.

The God who is revealed at Christmas is the only one who can heal human relations because he does not act only on a geopolitical level but also on a personal level. The dramatic scourge of femicide originates in the hearts of men, where there is no respect and where love and truth are not joined together. But Christmas is all these realities together: respect, love, truth.

Only when you see the face of the Lord can you encounter the faces of people and understand their reasons. Only when you see the face of the Lord can you rediscover real fraternity. And this happens when you start by acknowledging the paternity of God who sends his only son.

We need to turn to the "heart" or the "essence" of Christmas, purifying it from all those realities which were initially human expressions of the faith of believers, and which have ended up taking precedence (the lights, the shopping, presents, *panettone*, holidays in the snow or at some exotic destination, etc.)

There are those who even want to replace the name "Christmas" with a generic "festival of light" or "festival of gifts", and in so doing the little gifts of consumerism and the Christmas lights which devour energy – which could have been put to better uses –

would substitute the "Light" and the "Gift", in other words Jesus Christ, with something which is the expression of the merely human.

Humankind today, more than ever, needs the real Light and the real Gift. It needs the Babe born in Bethlehem, not more things which are merely the expression of a satiated consumer society which no longer has any hope, as the constant decline in the birth rate suggests, and which is an indication of something more than just a statistic.

But why did He who is the fullness of the revelation come to us as a child? A child needs our total commitment, which brings us out of ourselves, and if the beginning of any conflict is a result of failing to listen and to welcome, the child of Bethlehem asks us to listen, to be near, and to love.

Baby Jesus holds out his hands and asks us to welcome him, but to do this we need to be ready to love him; there is no welcome without love, with which we know and, especially, recognize others.

The child of Bethlehem is the opposite of a world in which the ego of individuals arrogantly asserts its own vision and its own plans.

The child of Bethlehem lies in the manger – in a poor, simple stable – where everything is within reach, where no one is in the front row, and where reciprocity reigns. And everything happens in the light which illuminates the darkness of night, as we approach that Child who is the only Son of God.

The light of Christmas invites us all – and God loves us all, indistinctly - to look up and to encounter that Child who is the source of a new humanity. The Holy Child of Bethlehem is the way of peace and the beginning of a new pacification because he does not separate Love and Truth and in Him God, who is both Love (Greek: *agapé*) and Truth (Greek: *logos*) together, becomes accessible to us all.

Happy Christmas!