



RELIGIEUSES DE L'ASSOMPTION
Maison Générale
17, rue de l'Assomption
75016 PARIS – France



Mob. 33.7.57.40.34.20

Email : rekha.chen2018@gmail.com

Christmas Chapter 2019

Very dear Sisters and Friends,

Christmas brings us the message of peace and hope in a world in which our experiences signal that peace is becoming a rare product and hope is daily challenged. At times it is hard not to feel discouraged when our best does not seem good enough, when things go wrong with our relationships in community, family, and office despite our best intentions; when tragedy hits us both near and far; when there is blatant abuse of power and scandals in the church; when so much political turmoil and unrest in different parts of the world make people unsafe and insecure; when so much of our news is about rising intolerance, violence and the destruction of the environment. But every year Christmas comes to remind us of God's presence in our fragile and imperfect human history.

THE LUKAN INFANCY NARRATIVE (2:1-21)

One can read and interpret Christmas narratives from a variety of perspectives. Last year we emphasized the aspect of God's migration from the heavens to the earth, focusing on the mystery of the Incarnation as given in the prologue to John's Gospel. This year, I would like to turn to the infancy narrative in the Gospel of Luke, highlighting the different characters and their actions in the story: the emperor and his decree, the angels and their message, the shepherds and their response, the child Jesus and his parents.



At the beginning of the narrative, Luke announces the census decreed by the emperor Caesar Augustus which sets the world in motion. The purpose of the survey was to collect taxes from every citizen of the regions colonized by the Romans. The hardship for the poor people in the cold winter, especially for the pregnant women, was not of the slightest concern for the emperor and his officials. They imagined themselves to be the centre of the world and thought that the people were there for their benefit. In contrast to the decree of the Emperor is the message of the angels in the story. The angel of the Lord appears with a heart-warming message of peace – “do not be afraid” and announces the good news of the birth of the Messiah, the Saviour. Then a multitude of the heavenly host praised God singing: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!” The glory of God in heaven is thus associated with peace among humans on earth. While the emperor of Rome oppresses the people with his taxation and exploitation, the messengers of God bring peace and joy to the people. The message of the former makes people anxious and brings suffering, while that of the latter conveys joy and comfort.

A third important group of actors in the story is the shepherds. Although we think of them as pious, holy and humble people, the first-century shepherds in Judea were regarded by established Jewish religious traditions as sinners. Shepherds did not always follow the Jewish law concerning the Sabbath, fasting and other rituals of purity. Fights or quarrels among them whenever a sheep was lost or taken away by wild animals, were common. Hence, like other Jews, the shepherds were groping in the darkness of sin as they were waiting for the Messiah. But, unlike the Jewish authorities, they were open and became those whom God favours. They listened to the message of the angels and set out to meet the child Jesus. Although the appearance of the angel brought great fear to the shepherds, their visit to the crib brought them great joy. Now the sign given by the angel to the shepherds was the child Jesus: “a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (2:12). The parents, both Mary and Joseph, are presented in the story as responsible citizens and God-fearing people.

CHRISTMAS AND CELEBRATIONS

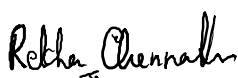
How are we celebrating Christmas this year? Like the decree of the emperor, do our choices and decisions make people suffer and feel insecure? Or like the message of the angels, do our words and deeds comfort people and make them free? Like the shepherds, are we – religious and laity – among those favoured by God? Like Joseph and Mary, how do we become responsible citizens and unwavering disciples? Where do we find the child Jesus today? How is the image of God as a child meaningful to us? How do we welcome the new year 2020?

For our further reflection, I ask you all: what do we learn from the image of God as a child? The traditional response is that God becomes a helpless child to save the marginalized people, and it is a sign of God's option for the poor. Although this is correct, I think that there is something more involved in the image. Looking at it using the lens of Saint Marie Eugenie who made clear distinctions between the values of Jesus and those of this world, we are called to a complete change of mindset and perspective. In a world that pursues power through money, exploitation and violence, the God-child is a prophetic affirmation of a counter-culture founded on powerlessness, helplessness, loving dependence, and true joy. It is an invitation to embrace the truth that we are vulnerable, imperfect, incomplete, interdependent social beings. We desire happiness and we know the pain of non-acceptance. True contentment does not come from power, position or wealth. True community arises out of vulnerability, humility, interdependence, and common vision. True love is always reciprocal and has a need for the other. An awareness of being "self-sufficient" indicates the death of communities, families, and societies. We are called to enter into a relationship of mutuality and interdependence, which is more than just giving and receiving. In relationships of reciprocity, we give by receiving and we receive by giving; we win by losing and we lose by winning – we live by dying. Our own helplessness coupled with faith and courage will change how we see the world, the way we see others, and most importantly, the way we see ourselves at the service of God's mission.

In a few hours, we celebrate Christmas and look forward to the dawn of a new decade. Let us deepen the spiritual qualities necessary for today - mindfulness, nonviolence, non-judgement, gracious forgiveness, generous service and passionate commitment to the values reflected in the image of the child Jesus – the spiritual power of powerlessness and helplessness. Let us not forget that sometimes deeper insights on life come through bleak times of suffering as we face realities with honesty and courage. Loving acceptance of the truth coupled with complete trust in God's infinite mercy work wonders in our lives. Let us inspire, motivate and persuade one another to give of our best in the new year for the good of all. When we recognize that we have God's favour, the impossible becomes possible, and we are able to overcome the obstacles that earlier seemed insurmountable. In other words, God's favour will lead us to where we cannot go on our own. Let us then replace positive thoughts for negative ones and become daughters and sons of Marie Eugenie, whose eyes are fixed on holiness and God's choices.

As we celebrate Christmas this year, let us say goodbye to all that would make us slaves of this world and its values, and be prepared to do something different, something we have never done before to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others. Let us welcome 2020 with a passion for new dreams, for a better community or a better family – a better world!

I wish you all a Grace-filled Christmas and a Blessed New Year!



Rekha M Chennattu, RA
Superior General