

## Homily for the Midnight Mass - Christmas 2023

Dearest Brothers and Sisters,

May the Lord give you Peace!

Tonight's Gospel echoes the voice of a deep feeling, which I believe we all share: "*there was no room for them*" (Lk. 2:7). As it was for Mary and Joseph so it seems for us today that there is no room for Christmas. For too many days, we have all been caught up in the sad and painful feeling that there is no room this year for the joy and peace that the angels announced to the shepherds of Bethlehem in this Holy Night, not far from here.

At this moment our thoughts cannot be far from those who have lost everything in this war, including their closest loved ones, and who are now displaced, alone and paralyzed by their grief. My thoughts go, without distinction, to all who are affected by this war, in Palestine and Israel and the whole region. I am especially close to those who are in mourning and weeping and waiting for a concrete gesture of closeness and care. Tonight, I remember the hostages kidnapped from their families, as I remember the people who languish in prisons without having had the right to a trial.

My thoughts go to Gaza and its two million inhabitants. Truly the words "*there was no room for them*" describe their situation, which is now known to all. Their suffering ceaselessly cries out to the whole world. No place or home is safe for anyone. Thousands of people have been deprived of their basic needs; they are hungry, and they are even more exposed to incomprehensible violence. There seems to be no place for them, not only physically, but also in the minds of those who decide the fate of nations. This is the situation in which the Palestinian people has been living in for too long. Though living on their own land, they continually hear "*there is no place for them*". For decades they have been waiting for the international community to find solutions to end the occupation under which they are forced to live and its consequences. However, today it seems to me that each of us is entrapped by his own pain. Hatred, resentment, and the spirit of revenge occupy all the space in our hearts and leave no room for the presence of others. Yet, we need others. Christmas is precisely about this: God making Himself present in a human way and opening our hearts to a new way of looking at the world.

Not that the world has always been hospitable to Christ: it isn't news that the Christian faith and the Christian meaning of Christmas are but a faint memory in today's secularized and materialistic

culture. Yet this year, here and elsewhere in the world, the noise of weapons, the children's tears, the suffering of the refugees, the cry of the poor, the grief of so many mourning families, seem to make our songs lose harmony. It seems difficult to rejoice and our words seem empty and void.

Let it be clear: Christ's coming into our world has opened for us and for all "the way of eternal salvation", which nothing and no one will ever be able to close. The faith, hope and love of the Church of God are unfailing and solidly rest on the faithful Promise of the Lord. They do not depend on the changing times and the adversity of the circumstances that surround them.

However, it is just as evident that we struggle, especially here, especially today, to find a place for Christmas in our land, in our life and in our heart. We risk losing that way which Christ opened for us, in the labyrinth of war-torn roads, rubble and abandoned homes. Our heart, so overburdened, may fail to fall in tune with the Christmas message. Too much pain, too much disappointment, too many broken promises, crowd that inner space in which the Gospel of Christmas can resonate and inspire peaceful and life-giving actions and behaviors.

Let us ask ourselves then: where is Christmas this year? Where can we look for the Savior? Where can the Child be born when there seems to be no place for Him in this world of ours?

As we have heard, Mary and Joseph asked themselves this question as they faced the difficulty of finding lodging that night. The Shepherds asked the same question as they looked for the Child, and so did the Magi as they chased the star. It has been the question of the Church every time it lost its way. It is our question tonight: where is there place for Christmas today?

The Angels give us the answer. On that night, and in every night, God always finds room for His Christmas. Even for us, here, today, despite everything, even in these dramatic circumstances, we believe so: God can make room even in the hardest of hearts.

The place of Christmas is first and foremost God. Christmas, the Nativity of Christ, is in the beginning, within the merciful Heart of the Father. His infinite and endless love eternally generates the Son and gives Him to us in Time, even in this time. The salvation of man was decided upon in His good and holy will. "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him*". (Jn. 3:16-17).

In the present circumstances, if we want to find the true joy of Christmas and if we want to meet the Savior, we, the whole Church, must return to God and to His love. We must go beyond the social and political explanations of violence and subjugation of others. These phenomena are ultimately rooted in having forgotten God, having made a false image of His face, and having used a fake and utilitarian religious relationship with Him. This happens all too often in our Holy Land. If we are unable to call brothers our fellow men, neither will we be able to call God our "Father". It is even more true that we cannot recognize ourselves as brothers unless we return to the true God by recognizing Him as a Father who loves everyone. If we don't find God anew in our lives,

we shall inevitably lose the way that leads to Christmas, and we shall find ourselves wandering alone in the night without a destination and fall prey to our violent and selfish instincts.

Mary and Joseph's "yes" is also the place of Christmas. Their obedience and faithfulness were the home in which the Son came to dwell. God's will is not a power that subjugates and bends, but Love that exerts all its strength only if welcomed by a faithful and generous personal freedom. True freedom is not only the capacity to choose but is being able to choose with loving responsibility for our good and the good of others. The Son of God, begotten of the Father, has entered the spectrum of time through the open door of human freedom. Christmas, the Nativity, is found everywhere a man and a woman say "yes" to God! Wherever a person's life is at the service of the Peace that comes from on High, rather than serving their own interests, that is where the Son is born and where He continues to be born.

If we want it to be Christmas, even in times of war, we all need to increase our actions that speak of brotherhood, peace, acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Allow me to add: we must all commit ourselves, beginning with me and those who, like myself, have a responsibility to lead and direct the social, political, and religious spheres, to develop a "yes" based mindsets rather than "no" based strategies. Saying yes to what is good, yes to peace, yes to dialogue, and yes to others. It should not be a rhetorical exercise but a responsible commitment. It should make room, not occupy it; find a place for others and not deny them one. Christmas was made possible by the space that Mary and Joseph offered to God and the Child who came from Him. It will not be different for Justice and Peace. There will not be justice and peace will not come unless we make room for them through our open and generous "yes".

It would not be Christmas without the Shepherds. Their staying awake in the night is also a part of the Gospel. They are the first to find the Child. Luke the Evangelist does not dwell on their social condition but focuses rather on their inner disposition. That night, the Shepherds, found themselves alert and down to earth as always, ready to act and openminded. They did not overthink or make excessive calculations and were thus ready for Christmas. In a time inevitably marked by resignation, hatred, anger and depression, we need Christians to be like the Shepherds so that there may be room for Christmas!

To this my beloved Diocese, to its priests, seminarians, religious men and women, committed lay men and women, and all the parish communities with their groups and associations: I feel that I must remind us all that we are heirs of those Shepherds. I know well how difficult it is to remain alert, willing to welcome and to forgive. How difficult it is to always be ready to begin again, to set out on the way even if it is still night. This is the only way for us to find the Child. This is the only witness that ensures that Christmas will find room in this time and in this land, so that it may enlighten the whole world. We are here and we intend to continue being the shepherds of Christmas, that is, those who, in their poor and fragile conditions, have found the Child and have experienced His grace and consolation, and desire to announce to all that Christmas is yesterday and today true and real.

Dear brothers and sisters, my hearts wish is my prayer: may our will to do good, which becomes concrete through our responsible and generous “yes” to our commitment to love and serve, may that be the room that Christ finds so that He may always be born anew in us! I ask this for myself, for my Church in the Holy Land and for every Church. May the Church be a home for all, and a space of reconciliation and forgiveness for those who seek joy and peace! I ask all the Churches in the world, that look to us in this time not only to contemplate the mystery of Bethlehem, but also to support us in this tragic war: please convey to your people and their governments your “yes” to God, your desire for the good of our peoples, for the cessation of hostilities, so that all may truly find again a home and peace.

I pray that Christ be reborn in the hearts of those who govern and those who lead the nations and that He may suggest to them His own “Yes”, which lead Him to become a friend and brother to us and to all. May those who govern commit seriously to stopping this war. Most of all may they once again begin a dialogue that finally leads to finding just and dignified solutions for our peoples. The tragedy of the present moment tells us that it is no longer time for short lived tactics or for references to a theoretical future. Rather, it is time to state, here and now, a clear and definitive word of truth that may heal the root of this ongoing conflict by removing its deep causes and unlock new horizons of serenity and justice for all, for the Holy Land and for our region which is marked by this conflict.

Words like *occupation* and *security* and many other similar ones, which have dominated our respective narratives for too long, must be strengthened by *trust* and *respect*. This is what we want for the future of this land. Only this shall guarantee a real stability and peace.

May Christ be born anew in this land, His and ours, and may the way of the Gospel of peace for the whole world begin again from here! May He be reborn in the hearts of those who believe in Him, moving them to witness and mission, without the fear of night and death! May He also be reborn as a desire for peace and goodness, truth and justice, in the hearts of those who do not yet believe!

May Christ also be born in our small community of Gaza. My dear brothers and sisters, I used to spend a few days with you, before Christmas. This year it was not possible, but we won't abandon you. You are in our hearts, and the whole Christian community in the Holy Land and around the world gathers around you. May you feel the warmth of our closeness and affection as much as possible.

Finally, may Christ be reborn in everyone's heart, so that for everyone it may still be Christmas! Merry Christmas! (**Wulida Al Masih – Alleluia**)

*Bethlehem, December 24, 2023*

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