

CHRISTMAS — MASS at MIDNIGHT

READING I Is 9:1-6

READING II Ti 2:11-14

GOSPEL Lk 2:1-14.

Things will get worse before they get better. Prior to this passage, Isaiah of Jerusalem spoke of the downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel. Only after the gloom and despair of that experience will the Lord raise up an ideal Davidic king who will reunite the tribes of Israel. For the people dwelling in darkness, it will indeed be a day of great light and joy comparable to harvest time and the division of spoils after a battle. The yoke symbolizes the allegiance to a foreign power, the neo-Assyrians. But the Lord will smash and utterly devastate that yoke after Gideon's decisive defeat of the Midianites.

Isaiah next describes the birth of the ideal Davidic king and its implications for God's people, probably citing part of the coronation liturgy. According to Ps 2, the king is God's son. His relationship with the Lord God and his efforts for the people are summed up in his throne names which may be translated: "The Mighty God is planning marvels; the Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler." Such a king will regain the territories of the old Davidic kingdom. He will rule with judgment and justice, providing for the needs of the people. It is God's zeal which will see to the fulfillment of these promises.

In the verses prior to this passage, the author of Titus lists the rules for the household, including old men, old and young women, young men, and slaves. These rules for the household contained the duties of different categories (domestic codes) and were a pagan form which were eventually Christianized. In this reading, the author provides a theological basis for the duties previously enumerated. Although the vocabulary draws upon the language of the emperor cult ("appearance," "savior," "god") and also the Greek cardinal virtues (fortitude is missing), the usage is quite biblical. God has revealed his goodness to all people and calls for a response in terms of a truly Christian life. This life is linked with the second coming of Jesus. At this point, the author explains how through his sacrificial death Jesus is savior. The purpose of his self-giving is to form a people for himself which will be the ideal basis of holiness.

Lk 2:1-20 has the following structure: (1) The setting, including the census (vv 1-5) and the birth/swaddling (vv 6-7); (2) The annunciation, including the angel's message/sign (vv 8-12) and the appearance of the heavenly host reciting the Gloria (vv 13-14); (3) The reactions, including the shepherds' visit to Bethlehem (vv 15-17) and the effect on Mary and all who heard (vv 18-20). For Luke, the significant element is the angel's message, not the birth, since the message interprets the event for the shepherds.

Historically, Quirinius, while legate in Syria, had only one census, in 6-7 A.D., which

affected Judea, not Galilee. Luke, therefore, moves Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem for his own purposes. Augustus provides the appropriate setting since Jesus will be savior of all those registered. Augustus was also hailed as savior of the whole world. But for Luke, real peace came only from Jesus. Therefore, the heavenly host announces peace "to those on whom his favor rests."

The manger may refer to Is 1:3. There, the Greek text says that the donkey knows the manger of its lord. "The place where travelers lodged" may have in mind Jer 14:8, where only the passing traveler spends the night. The swaddling may allude to Wis 7:4-5, where the great King Solomon is swaddled. Luke portrays Jesus as born in the city of David: That is, Bethlehem (although according to 2 Sm 5, Jerusalem is the city of David). Furthermore, Luke presents Jesus as born in a manger, the place where God provides for his people, not in the lodging of a night traveler. Finally, Luke suggests the regal dignity of Jesus by use of swaddling.

Luke introduces the shepherds because of their association with Bethlehem as given in Gn 35 and Mi 4: & 5:). Using Is 9:5, Luke has the shepherds announce that a Messiah, son of David, has been born, who is also Savior and Lord. The reality of the exaltation is already present in the conception/birth. There next follows a theophany ("the heavenly host"). The angels recognize in the beginning what the disciples will recognize in the end, Jesus the Messiah and King.

Christmas joy means including everyone. By our card list and our gift list, we consciously exclude. Yet the contagious joy of Luke's Christmas Gospel is to include everyone. Luke deliberately joins the census of the whole world to the birth of the Messiah/Lord/Savior. He has the angel announce the "tidings of great joy to be shared by all the people." Christmas joy means including everyone.

Our temptation is to contain ourselves and not break free. Somehow, we have conveniently argued that our relationship to the Savior is a one-on-one relationship or, at best, one that is limited to a few select friends. We find it difficult to forgive, even after the guilty party has sought our forgiveness. We find it awkward to share our time and energy with the down and out — all who are smugly labeled "minority groups." We find it impossible to find good things to say about those who are the target of our petty gossip. We choose, therefore, to remove such people from the view of our concern. Yet Christmas joy means including everyone.

It is basically a question of identity. Luke has the angels discover at the beginning what the disciples will recognize only in the end: The identity of Jesus as Messiah/Lord/Savior. For Luke, the exaltation begins with the conception/birth. For us, it is also a question of identity. By refusing to love someone, we give up the identity quest. By excluding anyone, we thereby refuse to search deeper. Afraid perhaps that we may find an image of God

which we originally judged to be unlikely, if not impossible. Yet Christmas joy means including everyone.

Eucharist is not an ego trip. It is the communal experience of needs and problems, joys and successes, frustrations and failures. By sharing Jesus' sense of self-giving, we are invited to take away his sense of audience, that is, everyone. By participating in the joy of his exaltation, we are asked to communicate that joy to everyone. Christmas joy means including everyone.