

HOMILY
BY ADAM CARDINAL MAIDA
CHRISTMAS EVE MIDNIGHT MASS
BLESSED SACRAMENT CATHEDRAL
DECEMBER 25, 2004

My Brothers and Sisters in the Lord:

We gather at this solemn and sacred hour of midnight, setting aside our usual time for sleep. We have left the comfort of our homes to gather here at this Mother Church of our Archdiocese to celebrate together the mystery and gift of the birth of Jesus Christ, Son of God and our brother. Tonight, many families become one family in the Lord. Tonight, our hearts are filled with hope and joy, remembering the first Christmas and many celebrations of this feast over the years. We also look forward to the fulfillment of this feast when the Lord will come again in glory, and so, we gather at midnight, a moment when we are literally between two days; the past is fading and the future is about to dawn.

At this hour of darkness, like the shepherds of old, we watch and wait for the light of day. And, like children, our hearts are full of wonder and expectation. With these thoughts in mind, I would like to begin tonight's homily by quoting a few lines from a Christmas carol, a song rich in profound theology, a song that summarizes our hopes and dreams here tonight: "*Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in*

thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart."

Something of the Christmas story tugs at the heart of every human being. Even unbelievers and people of other religious faith traditions cannot escape the compelling message of Christmas. *Every* person—even the atheist—has longings and desires which can never be satisfied by the things of this world. In a world torn by wars and conflicts, violence and anger, we long for peace. Shackled by a lifestyle that often prevents us from attaining the deepest desires of our hearts, we long for freedom. We seek after acceptance and mutual forgiveness, but yet, we are often too proud to take the first step. Deep in our hearts, there is a holy longing for something and someone to console us and give us hope, and reason for living and for dying.

Tonight we gather and proclaim that the long-expected and long-desired Messiah has come! We believe that He is truly the “dear desire of every nation,” “the joy of every longing heart.” In the midst of our fears and hopes, we hear the consoling message of the angels to the shepherds: “*Be not afraid. Today, in the City of David, a Savior is born for you, the Messiah and Lord.*”

As we consider our world, we see the bloodshed and battles Isaiah described in our first reading: endless, daily violence in Iraq and throughout the Middle East and even in our city streets. We have witnessed the collapse of large businesses

and worry about our security and economic stability. We know brokenness, sin, physical pain, and loss in our hearts and families. We look for solutions but our imagination and creativity can never seem to resolve things. We try hard, but our energy fails. Where is the answer?

We gather this evening because we believe that God has spoken and given us the answer in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. In mystery of Christ's coming among us, an extraordinary thing has happened: not only does Christ respond to our hungers and desires, but he has come to share them Himself, to feel our pains and fears, to know all that pulses within our veins. As the Council Fathers of Vatican II have explained: *“By His Incarnation, the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice, and loved with a human heart.”* (GS 22) In fact, because of Christ, our many diverse and often contradictory and divisive desires have been purified. When we open our hearts to Christ and His love, our desires become one in Him. As our Holy Father put it in 1975 when he was Archbishop of Krakow: *“One single heart beats in us for the God who is born and whose birth we celebrate so that we, too, through Him, may become children of God.”*

Tonight, we believe that all the world becomes one family, one heart, and one mind for God dwells with us and shows us not only who He is but also what

He intends for us all. By reverencing the Christ child at the manger and in every human life, we come to know the deepest truth about ourselves, our world, and our destiny. As we reach out with humility and generosity toward every person as our brother and sister, our fears and pride fade away and mysteriously, the deepest desires of our hearts are finally satisfied.

Consider the shepherds of St. Luke's Gospel. We often think of them as quaint and endearing people privileged to be the first to hear the Good News and the first to adore the newborn King. And yet, according to Jewish customs of the day, they were considered people *outside* the law; they were shepherds because they could not find other better employment. Not many people wanted to take on the risks and dangers that went with being a shepherd—staying out on the hillside through all seasons, being responsible for every single sheep, constantly at risk of violent attack from wild animals.

The message of St. Luke is that God's Good News came *first* to such humble and ordinary people as shepherds. God wanted to show that His message satisfies the desires of *every* human heart as long as people are open and willing to let God get through to them. God humbled Himself to come among us and now it is our turn to respond in humble adoration and gratitude. Like the shepherds, this night we gather with hope and courage, grateful for the call of faith hidden within our restless hearts.

In a few hours, we will be gathering with family and friends to open presents and to share wonderful meals. We will sing and tell stories, relax and wonder about memories of days gone by. In the conversations and sharing, our disappointments and anxieties will be put into a wider context of hope and peacefulness. Even more, this healing and sharing is also happening already here and now at the Lord's Table. We recognize that our deepest hunger is not just for earthly food or human companionship; we also hunger for the gift of God's love. And only when we first attend to that deepest desire will we find reason and hope to live a life full of integrity and generosity, compassion and love *with* and *for* each other. At this Holy Eucharist, the Lord comes once again and shows us how to open our hearts to Him and to one another.

In this and every Holy Eucharist, we bring to the Lord our gifts of bread and wine. Just as He gave His own Son to us, we bring the best we can give, our own hearts and minds. Our gifts may be simple, but yet they are significant in their symbolism: the bread represents our human labor, and the wine, our joys. In the midst of the Eucharistic Prayer, God accepts, consecrates, and changes these human offerings and then returns them to us as the Body and Blood of His own Son. In this and every Eucharist, a transformation takes place: our gifts are changed and we also are changed.

As the Gospel tells the story of Christmas, it is clear that Christ came to be our food: He was born in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. To make the message even clearer, St. Luke stresses that He was born in Bethlehem—which literally means “City of Bread.”

The gift and mystery of Christ's presence in the Holy Eucharist is a gift for all people everywhere. As we gather at the Lord's altar tonight, we can begin to experience the gift and mystery of Christmas peace and the rich promise of a new beginning for our human family. As we enter into a drama greater than anything we could ever imagine, our lives are transformed and we become a living offering to God and willing servants of our brothers and sisters.

Let us pray with and for each other that the Lord's peace and kingdom might be born, a kingdom that can be known and experienced only by those who are humble shepherds. On this day, I wish you and your families all the grace and blessing of Christmas and pray that our world might know in a new and more profound way the peace that only the Lord Jesus can bring, a peace that flows from this altar.

I would like to conclude the homily just as I began, by inviting us to reflect on the inspired words of the Christmas carol: *“Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in*

thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart."

Merry Christmas! God bless you and all our world with Christ's gift of peace and life eternal. Amen.