

CHRISTMAS: THE FEAST OF THE BETROTHAL OF THE LORD WITH HIS PEOPLE

The liturgical period of Advent and Christmas brings to mind the expectation and the coming of our Lord among us. As we read in the first paragraph of the Letter to the Hebrews: “At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son, whom he appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything there is” (Heb 1, 1-2).

In one sentence, the father of our faith, St Paul, sums up the significance of the feasts which we shall celebrate in the coming weeks: “but when the appointed time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law” (Ga 4, 4).

During the first period of the holy feast of Advent, the Church invites us to keep watch, holding in our hands the lamps of our faith, as we await the second coming of the Lord. Jesus himself offers us some profound words of advice: “See that you are dressed for action and have your lamps lit. Be like people waiting for their master to return from the wedding feast, ready to open the door as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. In truth I tell you, he will put on an apron, sit them down at table and wait on them” (Lk 12, 35-37).

On several occasions, Jesus Christ referred to himself as the bridegroom of the faith community, as the bridegroom of the Church. When the Pharisees and the Scribes asked Jesus why his disciples refrained from fasting to indulge in eating and drinking, he replied: “Surely you cannot make the bridegroom's attendants fast while the bridegroom is still with them?” (Lk 5, 34).

Likewise, John the Baptist insists that Jesus is the bridegroom because he has a bride – the Church. The friend of the bridegroom, who is seated by his side, rejoices when he hears the voice of the bridegroom. John reiterates: “This same joy I feel, and now it is complete. He must grow greater, I must grow smaller” (Jn 3, 29-30).

The beautiful image of Jesus as the bridegroom of his people finds its roots in the writings of the Prophets, especially in the Prophet Isaiah. This prophet speaks of the love that God has for Sion, the holy city, which personifies the people of Israel, using ‘betrothal’ as a metaphor: “Like a young man marrying a virgin, your rebuilder will wed you, and as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so will your God rejoice in you” (Is 62, 5).

In the Prophet Hosea, we read how God speaks to his people using the same imagery of betrothal. The people are compared to an adulterous woman who abandons her spouse in order to seek other companions because she feels that they are the ones who have contributed to her wellbeing. Just like this woman, the people forget the One who has truly blessed them in abundance (cf. Ho 2, 7-10). In fact, the Book of the Prophet Hosea is a lament emanating from the heart of God, the bridegroom of Israel, as a consequence of the infidelity of his people: “Denounce your mother, denounce

her, for she is not my wife nor am I her husband. Let her rid her face of her whoring and her breasts of her adultery” (Ho 2, 4). Yet, in his mercy, the heart of God yields towards Israel and he chooses to establish a new bond with the people, an everlasting bond: “I will betroth you to myself for ever, betroth you with integrity and justice, with tenderness and love. Yes, I will betroth you to myself in faithfulness and you will come to know Yahweh” (Ho 2, 21-22). This is also because “We may be unfaithful, but he is always faithful, for he cannot disown his own self” (2 Tm 2,13).

The Apostle Paul displays great love for the Christian communities which he set up through his labour and preaching. Paul wrote very poignantly to the community of Corinth, a city in Greece, when he found out that his Christian brethren were possibly being misled by false prophets: “The jealousy that I feel for you is God's own jealousy: I arranged for you to marry Christ so that I might give you away as a chaste virgin to this one husband” (2 Co 11, 2).

In his letter to the Christians of Ephesus, a city in Turkey, St Paul described the love which Jesus Christ has for the Church and for all of us, using the beautiful metaphor of marriage: “Husbands should love their wives, just as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her in water with a form of words, so that when he took her to himself she would be glorious, with no speck or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and faultless. In the same way, husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies; for a man to love his wife is for him to love himself. A man never hates his own body, but he feeds it and looks after it; and that is the way Christ treats the Church, because it is his Body – and we are its living parts. *For this reason, a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one body.* This mystery has many implications; but I am saying it applies to Christ and the Church. To sum up: you too, each one of you, must love his wife as he loves himself; and let every wife respect her husband” (Ep 5, 25-33).

The time of Advent and Christmas should help us to reflect upon the way in which we love God and whether, as a Christian community, we are living in fidelity towards the God to whom we are bound “with integrity and justice, with tenderness and love” (Ho 2,21). It is a providential time to discover and live out our faith as an active relationship of love built upon fidelity towards God who forgives us because he truly loves us and holds no anger towards us (cf. Ho 14,5). To live our faith as an active relationship means going beyond the simple observance of the law. The observance of the law could be just an external act, like that of the Pharisees in the time of Jesus, which allows one to retain his exterior image, without any change of heart. Yet an active relationship begins at the level of the heart and challenges the heart to open up more and more, to overflow with the love of God. Such a relationship demands that the person takes time to listen to the voice of God who loves him. It demands that the person chooses to pay attention only to that voice and to disregard other voices. An active relationship calls for a constant recalling of all that God has brought about in the life and history of mankind. It requires each and every one of us to make clear decisions with respect to our friendships: one cannot be distracted and rely upon

friends who are insincere because in actual fact, these have the power to enslave us with their ideologies and false promises.

This holy time is indeed an opportunity to renew our commitment to live better as “friends of the bridegroom”, to be close to Jesus and listen to him, rejoicing when we hear his voice. (cf. Jn 3,29). By taking the initiative to love every person in Christ, who is the truth that frees, we are called to announce to our contemporary fellowmen this betrothal of God with mankind (cf Jn 8,32).

Christmas is the season during which we share greetings with one another and exchange gifts, and as citizens of Malta and Gozo we strongly express our solidarity with those who are in need as we share generously with our fellowmen. Yet, these feasts will remain beautiful only if they are a living witness of the love which God showed towards us through his only Son, born of Mary of Nazareth.

We augur that the feasts of Christmas will remain dear to our families. May they remain Catholic feasts during which everyone encounters a heart which loves, a heart which draws one close in pure and holy love; where children, safeguarded from any confusion and deception rejoice in holy joy; where the elderly and the infirm find great solace in their families; where the bonds of love destroy any form of antagonism and silences dissent.

May the feast of Christmas continue to remind us of the choice which God made to remain in our midst and to redeem us: to be for us Immanuel (which means “God is with us”) and to be our Jesus (which means “God the Saviour”). This reality should encourage us to be always a source of support for one another so that in every circumstance, we can act as a balm of forgiveness, justice, diligence, loyalty.

May the feast of Christmas also remind us of the option for poverty which God made in order to save us: “Remember how generous the Lord Jesus was: he was rich, but he became poor for your sake to make you rich out of his poverty” (2 Co 8, 9). This awareness should lead us to do our best so that in our society there will be an equitable distribution of assets and that the social conditions of the workers and pensioners will be improved.

During Christmastime, let us together bless God for the great love he has shown to us as persons who are vulnerable. We bless and praise him because he “has come to seek out and save what was lost” (Lk 19, 10).

We wish you a holy Advent and a peaceful Christmas in Christ and bestow upon you our pastoral blessing.

24th November 2013, Solemnity of Christ the King.

✘ **PAUL CREMONA O.P.**
Archbishop of Malta

✘ **MARIO GRECH**
Bishop of Gozo

✘ **CHARLES J. SCICLUNA**
Titular Bishop of San Leone
Auxiliary Bishop and Vicar General of Malta