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Christmas Message

December 22, 2020

“ The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined. ”

Isaiah 9:2

Dear Clergy, Religious, and People of God of the Diocese of Saskatoon:



Image from +M Hagemoen:
Christmas Night Cross Image
Diocesan Retreat Centre at
Trapper's Lake near Yellowknife

This favorite Old Testament passage of mine from the Prophet Isaiah (9:2) I think speaks to us in a significant way at this time. It has been a tough year. Not without its blessings but the great challenge of COVID 19, and the devastating way it has affected all our lives is utterly extraordinary.

The pandemic has stripped so much – and continues to do so. The things that are familiar and trusted – the ways that we casually relate with others; the

ability to carry out normal, daily tasks; our ability to more or less go as we please – to places of work, or to purchase things for our families, or even recreation – all of these are now severely limited.

Christmas will be different for us. We are being asked – in fact begged by our local governments to keep to our own immediate families, and not to gather and celebrate as we always have. Our civil authorities do not come to this position lightly – our health care resources are already severely stretched. The further spread of the Covid19 virus would be utterly devastating.

As I have been reflecting about why we do all of this, one of the Old Testament scriptures that has jumped out at me again and again is Abraham's prayer petition to the Lord, in which Abraham is concerned about the salvation of the righteous. In Genesis Chapter 18 Abraham petitions God to withhold devastation that is coming, for the sake of the very few

righteous: “Lord, [even] for the sake of [only] ten...?” I am reminded that we do all of this because a small percentage of us could be devastated by getting infected - especially our elders and those who are health-compromised.

This reflection also challenges and stretches me in new ways - including my awareness of the care of my brother and sister – let alone the many who are ‘the stranger.’ Amidst my frustration, regret, and disappointment that we cannot celebrate and enjoy Christmas as we always have ...**CHRISTMAS COMES!**
O come, O Come, Emmanuel.



Image from +M Hagemoen:
Christmas Nativity from the Knights
of Columbus

Whether we are ready, or not.... whether we can celebrate as usual... or not, whether we can gather with many or with only a very few... Christmas Comes! **GOD IS with us in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. God IS loving us, caring for us, holding us.**

As the saying goes: “We do not know why difficulty and tragedy comes and what the future holds, but we do know **WHO holds us** through the tragedy... into the unknown future.



Image from +M Hagemoen:
Good Friday Cross outside the
Cathedral of the Holy Family

The effects of the pandemic have been on everyone’s minds, including the Holy Father. As Pope Francis describes in the opening section of his recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*:

“...the pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities. ...for all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more

difficult to resolve problems that affect us all. Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality.”

Yes, indeed, things will probably not go back to just the way they were, at least not entirely. Maybe that is okay. In the encyclical, Pope Francis cites many things that should be different and, furthermore, which highlight how Jesus who comes at Christmas really is ‘*the reason for the season.*’

To start, we need to be open to growth and change in our lives. There are many things do need to change ...in my life, in our lives. The need for change and ongoing conversion is absolutely crucial. As Pope Francis states:

“Everything depends on our ability to see the need for a change of heart, attitudes and lifestyles ... (and watch for) ...human weakness, the proclivity to selfishness that is part of what the Christian tradition refers to as ‘concupiscence’: the human inclination to be concerned only with myself, my group, my own petty interests.” (#166)

The trials of the pandemic have certainly highlighted this temptation.

Secondly, the call to reflect on how we truly communicate and relate to others. Pope Francis highlights the task of truly

communicating with each other in an authentic, truly human way. Technology is a great gift, but is by itself an inferior tool, because,

“...Life exists where there is belonging, communion, fraternity; life that is stronger than death ...is built on true relationship and bonds of fidelity.” (#87)

A third challenge that arises is our true care for and support of the vulnerable. As the Pope states,

“We are still ‘illiterate’ when it comes to accompanying, caring for and supporting the most frail and vulnerable member of our developed society. We were created for a fulfilment that can only be found in love.”

The Holy Father challenges us about the persistent, deepening journey of that easy but challenging word, **LOVE.**

“Charity is at the heart of every healthy and open society, yet today it is easily dismissed as irrelevant for interpreting and giving direction to moral responsibility.”

On this theme, Pope Francis describes ‘solidarity’ as a key feature of our quest to become more Christ-like, and I would say, to move our sense of Christmas from being merely a holiday celebration of an event, to actually changing our hearts and lives. As Pope Francis states,

“Solidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. And service in great part means ‘caring for vulnerability, for the vulnerable members of our families, our society, our people.’ In offering such service, individuals learn to ‘set aside their own wishes and desires, their pursuit of power, before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable... service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, ‘suffers’ that closeness and tries to help them. Service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people.”

A fourth challenge for us all during these difficult times is to grow in what the Holy Father calls *“gratuitousness.”* This he states is the ability to,

“...do some things simply because they are good in themselves, without concern for personal gain or recompense. Gratuitousness makes it possible for us to welcome the stranger, even though this brings no immediate tangible benefit.”

Finally, I very much appreciate the Holy Father’s emphasis on the priority of forgiveness and reconciliation. Indeed, the mercy and salvific love of God for the



world is the reason that Jesus comes at Christmas. As the Pope states about forgiveness:

“...Those who truly forgive do not forget. Instead, they choose not to yield to the same destructive force that caused them so much suffering.” (#252)

Indeed, there is much to be angry about. However, left alone, our anger will consume and destroy us. O how the world needs to choose another way – the way demonstrated in the life and way of Jesus Christ.

May our celebration of Christmas focus us more on Christ’s forgiving, redeeming way. This year there’s less to distract us from this central message of why Jesus Christ comes to our world such notice that we really allow him to touch our hearts and change our lives. Or does our celebration of Christmas merely

mean legitimate celebration of Christmas cheer with others, lights and decorations, food, presents – but not much more.

Well, we cannot celebrate like we used to this year, but maybe this means we can take a hard look at Jesus Christ: the babe whose birthday we celebrate every year. He does boldly go where no one has gone before – which takes Him right into the heart and messiness of our lives – in order to bring love and light and which will take Him on the unique journey of pouring out His life in service: *the demonstration of the greatest love the world has ever known* – and this redeems, saves the World.

This may indeed be a Christmas like none other. Are we up for it?



Have a blessed and joy-filled Christmas season.



Sincerely in Christ,

+ M A Hagemoen

Most Reverend Mark A. Hagemoen
Bishop of Saskatoon