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“Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice” (Ps 96: 11) as we once again celebrate the glorious feast of Christmas. Let us be glad as we reflect on the words of the great 8th century B.C. Hebrew Prophet, Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light….For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace”(9: 1-6 – the first reading for the Christmas Eve Mass). As Christians, we rejoice that the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus recounted in the familiar story narrated by Luke: a worldwide census ordered by Caesar Augustus; Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary travel from their hometown of Nazareth to Bethlehem, the city of David; Mary gives birth to Jesus in a stable and places him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn; an angel of the Lord appears to shepherds proclaiming the “good news of great joy” that “a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord;” and suddenly a multitude of angels appears, saying “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (2: 1-14). This story, integral to a spiritual celebration of Christmas, has an inherent power to gladden our hearts and to prompt further reflection.

Our pilgrimage on this earth today encounters various forms of Isaian darkness. We walk in the dark valley threatened by regional wars, random violence, asymmetrical terrorism, widespread poverty, racial injustice, sexual harassment, economic inequity and political polarization – more darkness than we can stomach or even imagine. There is another form of darkness, however, that demands our attention if we are going to make progress in battling the familiar dark forces. For today, we also walk in the dark valley of ignorance, prejudice, deceit, lying, ambiguity, doubt, equivocation, and false consciousness. We are threatened by what Pope Benedict called the “tyranny of relativism.” The value and importance of truth itself is under attack. Some suggest we have entered the post-truth era, featuring alternative facts and lying without embarrassment.

With this form of darkness threatening the very foundation of society, we do well to celebrate Christmas this year as a festival of truth, a truth-affirming holyday. The people who walk in the darkness of intellectual and moral blindness have seen a great light, for the promised son was born and lived among us as the Wonder-Counselor. The child of Mary and Joseph, born in a stable, is indeed a wonderful counselor, a truly wise guide. Jesus is the visibility of divine truth. He is the wisdom of God, revealing the secrets of the Father. Christ is himself the truth who shows us the way by walking this hard earth with us. The Word made flesh reveals to us the deepest truths about human existence and lights our path through the dark valley. By sharing our life completely, in all ways except sin, Christ knows human nature and has firsthand knowledge of the joys and sorrows of the human adventure.

Christ, our wise guide, teaches us that God is Absolute Truth, the Source of all truth. Just as God is ultimately incomprehensible, beyond all knowing and imagining, so Truth always retains a mystery dimension. Nothing can completely comprehend Absolute Truth, no human being, no institution, no scripture, and no dogma. Even Jesus himself did not know all of God’s secrets; for example, he openly admitted he did not know when the end of the world was coming, a fact known only to the Father. Recognizing the mysterious character of Truth preserves us from self-righteousness and encourages us to keep striving for a deeper understanding of reality.

By becoming man, the Word of God provides an answer to the great existential question of the relationship between the Infinite and the finite, the Whole and the parts, the Universal and the particular, the Creator and the creatures. One answer to that perennial question is the secularist view that the world as we know it is self-contained; that there is nothing beyond what is empirically verifiable; and that talk of a Creator is illusory and even dehumanizing. At the other extreme are pan- theistic worldviews that see the All or Infinite completely absorbing the finite world, rendering it illusory without intrinsic meaning. The Christian doctrine of Incarnation that we celebrate on Christmas offers the most radical solution to the problem: The Creator God sent his Son to share completely in the life of his creatures. God is personally present in the totally helpless infant in the crib, who needs human care and love to grow up into a healthy adult. As a mature man, condemned to an ignominious death on the cross, Jesus would once again experience the vulnerability of the human condition, this time with the added burden of feeling abandoned by his Father. By his very existence as the Incarnate Word, Jesus instructs us in the fundamental truth that God is not a remote spectator of the human scene but is an active participant in our common mix of joys and sorrows. We rejoice on Christmas because our God walks with us in all situations, in the dark valley and on the mountain top.

Our Wonderful Counselor insists that we value truth and avoid hypocrisy. He lived as an authentic person, true to his mission even though it brought him to the cross. His interactions with both followers and opponents were honest, forthright, and guided by charity. In John’s gospel, Jesus often comments on the truth in his personal encounters. To a question posed by Thomas the Twin, he responded: “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). To Jews who believed in him, he taught “If you live according to my teachings, you are my disciples; then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (8:32). In his marvelous dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well, he insisted that, with his coming, authentic worshipers “will worship the Father in Spirit and truth” (4:23). When Pilate interrogated Jesus about being a king, he affirmed “the reason I was born, the reason I came into the world is to testify to the truth. Anyone committed to the truth hears my voice“ (18:37). In his farewell discourse at the Last Supper, Jesus promised his disciples that he will send them the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, who will instruct them in everything, remind them of all he had taught them and guide them to all truth. The Paraclete will reveal the truth about the sin propagated by the prince of darkness that corrupts the world (16:5-16, 14:16-17). With John the Evangelist as our tutor, we see that Jesus himself not only embodied the truth but also highlighted its liberating power and its essential role in authentic worship.

The birth we celebrate on Christmas achieves its deeper meaning in Christ’s witness to truth in word and deed throughout his whole life. By sending the Paraclete to his disciples, then and now, Christ draws us into the great mission of witnessing to truth in our world today where truth itself is under attack. At the Christmas liturgy, with its inherent power to gladden our hearts, we can hear the Wonder-Counselor, born in Bethlehem, inviting us personally to take up the cause of defending the truth he lived and proclaimed. We can respond by striving to be more honest with ourselves, by purifying our motives, and by avoiding rationalizations. We can work at improving our personal relationships by striving to be more authentic, open and honest, always guided by the supreme virtue of charity. Considering the severe danger of making deceit normal in the public square, we can hear the Christmas message as a call to join with all people of good will in a shared struggle to defend truth. This means respecting facts and naming lies. It requires honest dialogue in pursuit of a deeper and wider truth than anyone in the conversation currently possess. We should avoid demonizing those who disagree with us and look for opportunities to collaborate with those who share our views. Our society will function better if we can make progress in transforming polarization into a healthy pluralism that respects truth.

Christmas has its own intrinsic joy that delights our hearts: the exuberance of the children; the exchange of gifts; the traditional meal; the inspiring liturgy with familiar readings and hymns; and the family at peace for at least a time. As a celebration of the Incarnation, however, Christmas directs our attention to the everyday world sanctified by Christ, who shared its delights and disappointments. We can extend our joyful celebration of Christmas by standing up for truth in the days ahead. In that effort, we can count on the support of the Incarnate Word, the Wonder-Counselor who embodies truth, who taught us to live authentically, and who sent the Paraclete to us as a permanent guide to all truth. Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice as we celebrate Christmas as both a feast of family harmony and a festival of truth-telling.