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Christmas Eve Mass remains a beautiful, bright strand in the rich tapestry of traditional Catholic life. Families come to church in a good mood; the children are dressed up and filled with anticipation of the family customs that make Christmas special; the decorations in the church are festive; the music is familiar and uplifting; the Gospel repeats the well-known story of a census, a long trip for Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary, a crowded inn, the birth of Jesus in a stable, the visit of shepherds, and the appearance of angels praising God and proclaiming peace on earth. Participating in the liturgy, especially receiving communion, strikes our Catholic sensibilities as the proper way to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Every year at the Christmas Eve Mass we hear the first reading from the book of Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.” The great prophet Isaiah, who spoke truth to powerful kings some eight centuries before Christ, goes on to proclaim the victory of justice and peace over the dark forces of oppression and war. The people in the land of gloom will rejoice: “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.”

Although Isaiah was probably referring to the birth in 715 B.C. of Hezekiah, the son of King Ahaz, we Christians today apply the prophecy to Jesus Christ, who is for us the source of wisdom, strength, security and peace.

In today’s world, where the forces of evil seem especially vigorous, we have special need for the encouragement and strength of Christ our God-Hero. A case can be made that we are in a battle for the soul of the human family, a great struggle between negative forces that seek to divide, oppress and eliminate others and positive forces that strive to unite, liberate and protect those who are different. In the United States, the polarizing forces seem to be in control, especially in the political arena where negative advertising, harsh rhetoric and demonizing of opponents too often proves to be effective. Hate crimes are rising and we continue to struggle with racial discrimination. In the Catholic community, we continue to be rocked by new revelations of child sex abuse, and there is no clear end of this horrendous scandal in sight. Given all the bad news, it is hard to avoid discouragement and cynicism, as well as to maintain optimism and hope.

When times are tough, there is a tendency to look for heroes who will lead the fight against the destructive forces and mobilize people to promote the common good. Genuine heroes can serve as role models, inspiring us to become our better selves. They can help guide young people on the path to adulthood. They can encourage us in difficult times and give us hope that the arc of history does bend toward justice, as Martin Luther King maintained. The stories of great heroes can soften our hearts and toughen our minds.

All human heroes are flawed, as Greek tragedy suggests. They not only inspire us, but they eventually disappoint us. It is important that we do not make idols out of our heroes, lest we neglect their faults and justify their weaknesses.

This fundamental ambivalence of all human heroes turns our thoughts to Christ the God-Hero, the divine role model. In the Christian tradition, Jesus is often revered as the Prince of Peace and as the Wonder-Counselor, the Wisdom of God. Not much is said, however, about Christ as a hero, although the Book of Revelation does describe him as a mighty warrior, riding a white horse, who strikes down the evil nations with a sharp sword.

We find more talk of Jesus as a hero in secular literature, especially the influential book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* published in 1949 by Joseph Campbell, who studied heroes portrayed in mythology and literary classics, including Prometheus, Moses and Jesus. Campbell, who was influenced by Carl Jung, found a common pattern in the lives of heroes: they depart from their ordinary world into a supernatural region where they are tempted and win a decisive victory over evil forces, enabling them to return to their original world with gifts to benefit others.

Some elements of this general pattern can be applied to Jesus. He did spend most of his life living the ordinary life of a Galilean peasant; he did venture out and take on a public mission in the larger world; he did encounter trials set by the evil one and came out victorious; he did undergo a death leading to resurrection that enabled him to share the gift of the spirit with all people. The historical Jesus does not fit neatly into every element of Campbell’s pattern, but there is enough similarity to prompt further theological reflection on Jesus as a hero.

It is important to remember that Jesus was not a warrior-hero, despite the imagery of the Book of Revelation and common perceptions of military heroes. He did not lead an army, nor did he condone violent resistance to the Roman occupation that oppressed his people. He was a fully human hero, sharing the joys and sorrows of our common adventure. At the same time, he was the God-Hero, the divine image of God, one with his Father in heaven. His heroic life was not sullied by sin or limited by the flaws that afflict all human heroes. We could think of Christ as a superhero, who defeated the evil forces not by military means but by self-sacrificing love. His victory was not temporary or provisional but irreversible and definitive. His death and resurrection unleashed a positive energy that is unlimited and inexhaustible. Our supreme hero reconciled us not only with God but also with all human beings and with the entire created world. His credibility as a role model is enhanced by the fact that he lived what he preached, exemplifying in his own life the love of God and neighbor he taught. His encouraging words to us as we walk in the land of gloom ring true because he himself experienced the darkness of rejection, misunderstanding and animosity.

Christ is the universal hero who proclaims a message that can transform all cultures and who offers salvation to people of every nation. He is a wise hero, who by word and example teaches us the profound but simple truth that our life has ultimate meaning and that all of our efforts to do good are worthwhile. He is an enduring hero who remains with us and continues to intercede on our behalf.

As we struggle to manage the darkness of everyday life, the Christmas liturgy provides a bright light that lifts our spirits, gladdens our hearts and enlightens our minds. Let us pray that the God-Hero, Christ our powerful, wise and enduring hero, will grant us the strength and wisdom to do our part in the days ahead to transform the darkness into the luminous kingdom of justice and peace proclaimed by the angels at the birth of Jesus.