



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 19 December 2018

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In six days' time it will be Christmas. The trees, the decorations and the lights everywhere remind us that this year too there will be a celebration. The publicity machine invites us all to exchange ever new presents to surprise each other. But I ask myself: is this the celebration that God likes? What Christmas would he like, which presents and which surprises?

Let us look at the first Christmas in history to discover God's tastes. That first Christmas in history was *filled with surprises*. It begins with Mary who was betrothed to Joseph. The Angel arrives and changes her life. As a virgin, she will become a mother. It continues with Joseph, called to be father to a son without begetting him. A son who — in a dramatic turn of events — arrives at the least appropriate moment, that is, when Mary and Joseph were betrothed and according to the Law, could not live together. Faced with the scandal, the common sense of the time invited Joseph to repudiate Mary and save his good name; but despite this right, he surprises: in order not to shame Mary, he considers leaving her secretly, at the cost of risking his own reputation. Then another surprise: God changes his plans in a dream and asks him to take Mary with him. After Jesus is born and, having plans of his own for his family, once again in a dream, Joseph is told to get up and go to Egypt. Well, Christmas brings unexpected changes to life. And if we want to experience Christmas, we must open our hearts and be ready for surprises, that is, for an unexpected change in life.

But it is on Christmas Eve that the biggest surprise comes: the Almighty is a little Child. The divine Word is an infant, which literally means “unable to speak”. And the divine Word became “unable to speak”. There are no local authorities of the time nor ambassadors to welcome the Saviour: no, there are simple shepherds who, surprised by the Angels while they worked at night, hasten

without delay. Who would have expected this? Christmas is the celebration of the ‘*unprecedentedness*’ of God, or better, it is the celebration of an *unprecedented God* who overturns our logic and our expectations.

To celebrate Christmas, then, is to receive on earth the surprises of Heaven. We cannot simply live an earthly existence when Heaven has brought its news to the world. Christmas inaugurates a new epoch where life is not planned, but is given: where one no longer lives for oneself, on the basis of one’s own taste, but rather for God; and with God because from Christmas onward, God is the God-with-us, who lives with us, who walks with us. To experience Christmas is to allow oneself to be shaken by its surprising newness. The Birth of Jesus does not offer reassuring coziness by the fireside, but rather the divine shudder which shakes history. Christmas is the victory of humility over arrogance, of simplicity over abundance, of silence over clamour, of prayer over “my time”, of God over my self.

To celebrate Christmas is to do as Jesus did, who came for us needy ones and to *bend down* to those who need us. It is to do as Mary did: to *trust* God with docility, even without understanding what he will do. To celebrate Christmas is to do as Joseph did: to *arise* in order to do what God wants, even if it is not according to our plans. Saint Joseph is surprising. He never speaks in the Gospel; there is never a word from Joseph in the Gospel and the Lord speaks to him in silence. He actually speaks to him in his sleep. Christmas means preferring the silent voice of God to the din of consumerism. If we can pause in silence before the Nativity scene, Christmas will be a surprise for us too, not a thing that we have already seen. To stand in silence before the Nativity scene: this is the invitation for Christmas. Take some time, stand before the Nativity scene and be silent. And you will feel, you will understand the surprise.

Unfortunately however, one can have the *wrong celebration* and prefer the usual things of the earth to the newness of Heaven. If Christmas remains just a beautiful traditional celebration where we are at the centre and not him, it will be a missed opportunity. Please let us not make Christmas *worldly*! Let us not put the Celebrated One aside, as happened then, when he “came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (Jn 1:11). Ever since the first Gospel of Advent, the Lord has put us on guard, asking us not to weigh ourselves down with “dissipation” and “cares of this life” (Lk 21:34). During these days, we hurry about, perhaps more than at any other time of the year. But in this way, we are doing the opposite of what Jesus wants. We blame the many things that fill the day, the fast-paced world. And yet, Jesus did not blame the world. He asked us not to be dragged in, but to watch at all times, praying (cf. v. 36).

It will be Christmas if, like Joseph, we make room for silence; if like Mary, we say “*here I am*” to God; if, like Jesus, we are close to those who are alone; if, like the shepherds, we leave our enclosure to be with Jesus. It will be Christmas if we find the light in the poor grotto in Bethlehem. *It will not be Christmas* if we seek the glittering brilliance of the world, if we fill ourselves with presents, meals and dinners but do not help at least one poor person who resembles God

because, on Christmas, God came as a poor one.

Dear brothers and sisters, I wish you a Happy Christmas, a Christmas rich in the surprises of Jesus! They may appear to be uncomfortable surprises, but they are God's taste. If we choose them, we will make a splendid surprise for ourselves. Each of us has hidden within the heart the ability to surprise ourself. Let us allow ourselves to be surprised by Jesus this Christmas.

Special Greetings

I welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially those from Australia, the Philippines and the United States of America. My particular greeting goes to Japanese pilgrims accompanied by Cardinal Thomas Manyo Maeda, and to the children's dance team from Ukraine. In these last days before Christmas, I invoke upon all of you, and your families, the joy and peace of the Lord Jesus. God bless you!

I address a special greeting to *young people, the elderly, the sick and newlyweds*. The Birth of the Lord Jesus is imminent. May the festivity that we will celebrate again this year, during the Holy Night of his Nativity, reawaken in us God's tenderness for all humanity, when, in Jesus, and without reserve, he did not disdain to assume our human form. Let us entrust ourselves to Jesus and Joseph, that they may teach us to receive such a great gift: Emmanuel, God-with-us.
