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“Glory to God in the Highest”

2016 Christmas Message

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“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those whom he favors” (Luke 2.14)

I greet you from Jerusalem, the city of our Lord’s life, death, and resurrection. As I speak to you, members of the Body of Christ throughout our global communion, I am mindful that, together, we carry the news of God’s saving love to the ends of the earth.

Christmas offers us the challenge of joy. Why do I say it is a challenge? When we come to the time of Christmas, the beautiful images and messages of happiness often stand in contrast to the problems and conflict we see around the world. Nevertheless, Christmas reminds us of our responsibility to glorify and praise God, thanking God for the gift of God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the troubles of our world can sometimes distract us, causing us to forget to glorify the Lord. The photo of the young girl lighting a candle in the Lund Cathedral is just one image reminding us to not trust our own efforts alone, but to remember the saving work of our Lord and Savior. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1.5)

When we joined together in joint commemoration and prayer in Lund and Malmö, I felt the Holy Spirit guiding us toward historic reconciliation between our two churches, Roman Catholic and Lutheran. I felt the Holy Spirit leading us to see and affirm Gospel-centered faithfulness in each other. This is indeed a time for us to glorify God for all God has done in these 50 years of dialogue, carrying us from conflict to communion. Lund has been a call for all of us in the ecumenical movement, to remember that what unites us as the Body of Christ is more powerful than what divides us. At Christmas, and entering the New Year, let us concentrate on our common call and witness for the sake of the Babe of Bethlehem.

I have just come from a conference in Beirut focused on challenges facing Christians in the Middle East. Many Christians were with us from Iraq and Syria. I kissed their heads, praising God that they were still alive. They came to us as survivors, symbols of life rather than suffering, war, and death.

The joyful images of Christmas may lead some to forget those who have been forgotten by the world. Millions of refugees are trying to find a place in the inn. This is often how we hear the story of Mary giving birth in a stable rather than in a hospital or hotel. Mary, it seems, was forgotten.

But there is another, *Palestinian*, way to understand the story. Mary gave birth not in a little wooden building but in a cave. Even today, some people in Palestine live in caves. The story of the innkeeper, then, is not one of exclusion and neglect, but one of Palestinian radical hospitality and generosity.

You see, the innkeeper, not having any space, offered Mary and Joseph a place in his own home, safe in the back of the cave. This is the grotto over which the Church of the Nativity is built.

Christmas, then, calls our world to reevaluate: have we forgotten those Christians in Nigeria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sudan, Syria, Iraq and in other places living steadfast in their faith, in need of support and comfort? Are they forgotten? Or do we allow their conditions to disturb our own comfort?

These people—persecuted or refugees or displaced or poor—are not asking favors. They are asking for the message of Christmas: peace based on justice. When the angel sings “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Luke 2.14), we must remember: God favors them. God, who was born with them in displacement, would soon become a refugee in Egypt. It is our Christian call to favor the poor.

My message is that, for each of you, Christ is Emmanuel, with you wherever you are: in distress, in difficulty, in poverty, in sickness. God has not forgotten you; neither will our global communion. When the world tells you there is no place, there is always a place for you in God’s love. We will welcome you into our hearts, seeking justice in the name of the Babe of Bethlehem, Jesus Christ.

I wish for all of you God’s blessings for Christmas and the New Year from the Holy City of Jerusalem.

Merry Christmas  
Joyeux Noël  
Fröhliche Weihnachten  
Feliz Navidad  
メリークリスマス  
God jul  
Hyvää Joulua  
عيد ميلاد سعيد