

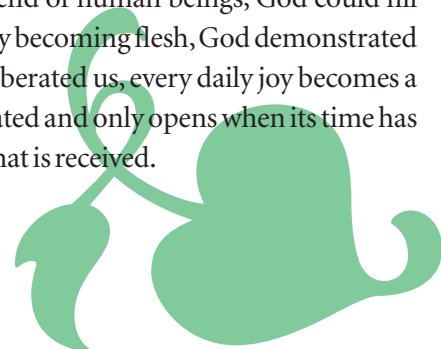
What is Christmas? Ornaments, parties, gifts, food, chants, and encounters...? Christmas indeed seems to be a special occasion of celebration for much of humanity, even for those who do not believe. For many it is the time of the year when good cheer and special acts of kindness abound. But isn't there a deeper significance to Christmas than warm feelings and festive celebrations? We all *know* about Christmas, but do we not also *believe* that what happened on that holy night transformed the story of humankind as well as our own personal story?

For believers, Christmas is a night of liberation in which the Word was made flesh in order to offer hope to us in our downtrodden and oppressive reality, just as it was a night of liberation for the people of Israel when they escaped their slavery in Egypt. It is significant that the Word enfleshed came to liberate at night, because night reveals and sustains its mystery when it joins together the infinite and the finite spheres, when activity is reconciled with rest, and when life is restored from death. In this formless presence in the night, space opens to give way to a silence, which is the companion of the presence that pervades it.

In one way or another, we have all lived the experience of Israel. We have all felt the need to overcome and to be liberated, because freedom, as the apostle Paul reminds us, is not something that we either have or do not have, but rather it is «our destiny» (Galatians 5:13). God became man to make us free and to lead us to what we can ultimately become. To celebrate Christmas means to believe that the freedom God has given us does not consist in simply doing what God wants us to do, as if we were programmed rather than free human beings. Instead, our freedom offers the radical capacity to love, and as a result of this, our love makes sense and our freedom has value. But, even while receiving this capacity to love, we have choices: either to be unfaithful or to freely give and donate the love of freedom with grace.

At Christmas we celebrate the value of our freedom, sustained by the reality of a gracious love that liberates. We celebrate the fact that God shares with us the space he has made for humanity and all of creation to live together. In this way, what is human is fulfilled in the presence of the Other, as was so beautifully expressed by Athanasius of Alexandria: «God has turned into the bearer of the flesh so that man can be the bearer of the Spirit». God became man because he has created us capable of receiving himself, and in this way, only in what is truly human has the form in which God wished to reveal himself been manifested to us.

It is in the presence of others and the Other that our lives discover their own human depth, and with that presence we can begin to appreciate the frailty and the wealth that others and the Other contribute to our life stories. When we believe that God has been made flesh we are affirming that he has fashioned this flesh to its fullness by loving it, assuming it, and bearing it. Thus, in Christmas we do not celebrate the greatness of a God or of a distant past, but the glory of humanity loved of God and assumed by him in its totality. What would be the sense of a God who demands that we go to him but who cannot come to meet us? Cabasilas reminded us that «being a friend of human beings, God could fill them with his benefits, but if he kept his distance, he could not suffer for them». By becoming flesh, God demonstrated the way in which he loves humanity. Because God has been made flesh and has liberated us, every daily joy becomes a blessing. God enters our life as the tree that blossoms, as the flower that is anticipated and only opens when its time has come. Only in this unfolding can our joys be surpassed by the blessing of the life that is received.





Our liberation has been offered to us at night, just as the people of Israel left slavery in Egypt at night. In the same way, God became a fragile child at night so that we might understand that freedom is not a certainty that grants safety on our life's journey, but rather, it is a road we must follow in our own story as we see the other as our own face. Freedom appears in the glitters of hope that emerge amidst the night. When we walk in darkness, these glitters emerge bright as stars, as «rays of darkness» (Juan de la Cruz) or «darkness of light» (R.M. Rilke) that illuminate our way. And when we give heed to the silence, the words that are made flesh in us emerge—words that truly transform our lives.

In this holy time, and as we approach the New Year, we offer to all our readers our greetings of peace and hope. May the good news of Christmas fill our homes and live in our hearts!



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