

BEHOLD-THE GIFT FROM GOD

TEXT: JOHN 1:1, HEBREWS 1:1

“But as many as received him, to them gave he power to be come the Sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”

This Christmas Tide I bring you the greetings of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, born to mankind, for our eternal redemption, who in His life among us spoke of nothing but love and peace, for which He was hung on a cross, to become our gift from God.

I recently had the opportunity to travel with my wife and daughter to a little town in North Carolina called Murphy. This community is nestled in the Smokey Mountains, in a beautiful valley with a clear river running through it, surrounded by farm land not unlike rural Maine. Murphy is deep within the Bible belt and I was astonished to find out that one could not buy beer in Murphy, or for that matter, any hard liquor, even in restaurants. There was a church on every corner, mostly Baptist, but one could find a Roman Catholic, Episcopalian and even a Lutheran Church among the houses of worship. Here in this little town, which had started to grow as more and more northerners looked to find warmer climates in their retirement, was a local paper. Like many of ours here at home it carried the local news regarding the cub scouts, bake sales, bean suppers and gardening tips, as well as classifieds for tractors and animal feed. What I found most intriguing however was a column written by a local man who addressed questions about religion. Now, I was not surprised by the fact that the paper carried this column but I was by the frankness used by the writer as he addressed questions of faith. I was particularly interested in his answer to a question posed by a woman from the area who simply asked “why do Christians feel that their religion is the only true one?”

I found the question itself to be surprising because in the politically correct world we live in, one would hardly imagine anyone saying that only their religion was the true one and that everyone else’s religion might be wrong. Just think of the scorn and criticism one would face if they commented in public that the Jews had missed out or that Buddha was way off base. One might comment that Mohammed was too violent but as we saw, when the Pope recently equated some sects of Islam with violence, they burned Christian churches and rioted in the streets. In fact, for the sake of harmony and peace, most Christians would never say that their way was the only way and some have even come to the conclusion that many religions are correct and that we were all on the road to heaven, just by different paths.

Yet our Lord Himself says something very different in Scripture. He says in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me.” Now one might think this arrogant, but as the writer pointed out, every prophet, every holy man, every person of spiritual prominence that had become the spiritual leader of some religion, except for one, were all human. What makes Christianity the exception was that Jesus Christ was the true and only Son of God. He was of God, was sent by God, redeemed us by God’s grace and opens the door for us to everlasting salvation. The writer made this comment in a manner that came across as definitive, factual, without question, and with full and total conviction.

This is in fact what makes us different from everyone else in the world. Because we have put our faith in a living, loving and gracious God, we have hope! Jesus Christ provides the gift of salvation and eternal life and nothing of this world, in fact no other religion, can make that statement or offer that promise. “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to be come the Sons of God.” Sons of God-that is the precious gift we have received in Christ.

It is not however the wood of the manger that has redeemed us but the wood of the cross. It is not the precious babe sleeping in his crib in Bethlehem but the Son of God who hung on the cross at Golgotha. It is not the child who was cradled in His mother’s arms in the manger, but the man whose broken body was placed in His mother’s arms at the foot of the cross. Christmas is the beginning of our Lord’s journey to Calvary.

The gift God gave to all mankind was our salvation, our redemption, the purging of our sins and the hope of eternal life. All of this would come through this wonderful savior who was born in humble surroundings, grew up in the care of loving parents, became a prophet who spoke of God's love for man and our need to be loving and faithful to Him and each other, and who would go to the cross as payment for our sins. Our Lord and Savior was born for us so He might die for us.

We live in a world that has made man the center of the universe. We have set aside God and replaced Him with self-gratification, human pleasure and the new religion of "what feels right cannot be wrong". We have replaced the Holy family with elves and reindeer, the glory of the resurrection with egg hunts and bunnies, and our houses of worship with rows of retail outlets.

None of us are immune to the destructive nature of the world and its continued attempts to destroy every vestige of Christ's divinity and all that we hold dear in our faith, which is constantly ridiculed, questioned and insulted. For over two thousand years, many have sacrificed their lives to hold onto what they believe as Christians. Today, men and women throughout the world are still dying because of their belief in Christ. Yet, those of us who have been blessed to live in a land where we hold freedom and the rights of man sacred, find it hard to stand up for our faith and to proclaim that Christ is Lord and to live our lives by His command, which is to love God with all our being, to love one another in the same fashion and to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all whom we touch.

If someone were to put a gun to your head and told you to denounce Christ or die, what choice would you make? Would the last words on your lips be words of forgiveness for someone who would take your life or pleading for man's mercy? While these seem like unlikely questions, on this Christmas, throughout the world, there are those being forced to make that choice.

Christmas is the manifestation of God as man. He lived among us and as the Gospel of John says, we knew Him not. Yet today His message and His sacrifice for us, continues to be a beacon of hope to those who believe. The writer to the Hebrews says "God... has spoken to us by His son...He had purged our sins..." For us as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ who we believe to be the Messiah, the true son of the living God, we have been given a wonderful gift beyond measure, paid for His blood on the cross. We have, through God's grace and our faith, eternal life in Him. He is our hope, our strength, our promise, our redemption; He is why we are blessed and why we should never hesitate to let the light of Christ shine forth in each of us.

The ways of the world are set aside when men and women of faith stand up to be counted. They are set aside when we reach out to touch those who have no hope, and when we heal our divisions as Christ has asked us to. They are set aside when we confront conflict with love and forgiveness and when we come before God in repentance and humility and we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us so that we grow in faith. The world is set aside when we study His word and seek to share the gift of God's grace with others.

I don't want to be politically correct when it comes to my God. It is a fact that everything I have, everything I am, my entire being and my hope of salvation in Jesus Christ is a gift from God Almighty. This celebration of Christmas is a time of renewal for all of us, and for those who we love and need to love. This celebration of Christmas is just one more chance to reach out to those who are looking for peace on Earth and help them to first find peace in their hearts.

Our Savior is coming to us. It is a time to pause and once again renew our relationship with God. It is a time of Thanksgiving for what He has given us in His one and only Son. It is a chance to start our lives over as we look at the new born baby lying in the manger. It is an opportunity to set aside the ways of the world, for the ways of God- ever faithful to us, ever with us. It is also another opportunity to see Christ for who He really is- the glorious Son of the one true and living God, all knowing and all eternal. For in Him, in the Nativity of our Lord, in the incarnation of God as man, "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

AMEN

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