

CHRISTMAS 2024

In the second reading for Midnight Mass, Saint Paul has given us a magnificent summary of our Catholic faith. It bears repeating, so listen again to what he wrote:

“Beloved, the grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ who gave Himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for Himself a people as His own, eager to do what is good.”

As usual, Saint Paul’s words are packed with meaning. So let’s unpack them ...

First of all, Saint Paul says that “the grace of God” has appeared, and remember that grace is defined as a “gift from God.” This grace of God to which Saint Paul refers is none other than Jesus Christ Himself. Saint Paul also calls Him “our great God and Savior.” Next, Saint Paul reminds us that Jesus “gave Himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse us” so that we could be His people.

Here remember that before the coming of Christ, we, and by we, I mean the entire human race had been enslaved and had been captured by the evil one. He had held us in bondage; he had imprisoned us, and there was no way out, and there was escape. Instead, because of our sins, we were condemned to live forever in spiritual captivity and degradation and shame.

But then, our Savior came to deliver us. He came to us on that first Christmas in Bethlehem. The “grace of God” came to us in humility as an infant, as a child born of the Virgin Mary. His birthplace was a stable, and because He had no crib, His mother wrapped him in swaddling clothes and then laid Him in a manger.

This event happened in Judea in a small town, a tiny village really, and even though this village and what took place in it was unknown to the rest of the world, the birth of “our great God and Savior” could not go unannounced. Why? Because this event was, quite simply, the greatest event that has ever taken place in the history of the human race.

As proof, I would simply point out that throughout the world, no matter where you go, no matter what nation or land and no matter what race or people, they all divide time into two segments. The time before the birth of Jesus Christ and the time after the birth of Jesus Christ.

Now because the birth of Jesus Christ was the greatest event in human history, the Incarnation could not go unnoticed or unannounced. And so it was that an angel appeared to shepherds who were watching their flocks by night, and the angel said to them, **“Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the City of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.”**

Then a vast multitude of angels appeared in the heavens singing, **“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will”**

This child who was and is our great God and Savior would grow up, and would go on to proclaim to all the good news of salvation. Later, by His suffering and death on the cross, He would save us and deliver us from all lawlessness and cleanse us from all sin.

Saint Paul then says that Jesus will come again, but for now, we await that time, and when He comes again, He will come not as a child, but He will come in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Saint Paul then sets forth what our response should be to all this. He mentions four things: First, we are to reject godless ways and worldly desires. Second, we are to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age. Third, we are to await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. Fourth, we are to be eager to do what is good.

Now, let me make some brief comments on each of these four points.

First, we are to reject godless ways and worldly desires. We live in a time where godless ways predominate. That means we have to choose to live with both feet firmly planted in the kingdom of God. If we do not, we will simply be swept away and fall into the godless ways and worldly desires of our pagan culture. We need to realize that there is no middle ground. We can't have it both ways. We can't be Catholic pagans.

So for our part, let us make sure that we reject godless ways and worldly desires and always seek first the kingdom of God.

Second, Saint Paul says that we should "live temperately and justly and devoutly in this age." So let us then always strive to use the goods of this world moderately and not to excess. Let us be just and fair in how we treat our neighbor. Let us also be devout. To be devout means to be fervent and serious about our faith. Let us not be like worldly people, like godless people, like those who can't find time to worship God.

Here it helps to keep in mind what it cost our dear Savior to set us free and to cleanse us so that we could be His people. Doing so will inspire in us a deep sense of gratitude to our God and Father for giving to us His beloved Son.

Third, Saint Paul reminds us to look for the coming of the Lord once again. In fact we pray for this each and every time we recite the Lord's Prayer. Each time we say "Thy Kingdom come Thy will be done" we are praying that God's kingdom be perfectly established and His will be perfectly followed by all.

Thinking about that time when our great God and Savior will come again should fill us with excitement and delight. That's because we will then see God face to face and know His perfect judgment over all. So then, let us then always strive to be ready for this blessed hope.

Finally, Saint Paul says we should be eager to do what is good. Here let us especially take his words to heart. Each of us has a part to play in making our world a better place. We all have much more influence than we may think. That's because God has blessed each of us with our own talents and skills and abilities and knowledge and experience, and these things are particular to us and to no one else.

It is with these gifts we have been given that we can do good. It is with these gifts that we can make the world a better place. It is with these gifts that we can help others. It is with these gifts that we can lift up the downtrodden. It is with these gifts that we can teach the young. It is with these gifts that we can protect the oppressed. It is with these gifts that we can do great things, each in his or her own sphere of influence.

Just as the Father has blessed us with His Son, and just as the Blessed Virgin Mary did the same, just as we have been gifted with the grace of God, let us do the same. Let us be eager to do good and to be good. Remember also that goodness is its own reward. It brings peace and joy to the soul. It lifts up hearts.

As we come together to celebrate the Incarnation, as we come together to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, let us listen carefully and well to Saint Paul who counsels us to reject godless ways and worldly desires, to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, to be eager to do what is good, and to await the blessed hope and appearance of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

A little more than 2000 years ago in a stable in Bethlehem in the land of Judah, a child was born to a virgin whose name was Mary. It was precisely because of His birth that we here do not walk in darkness but in truth and light as God's holy people.

So, this Christmas and every day of the year in fact, let us carry these glad tidings to all we meet. Telling someone about our Savior's birth is the greatest gift we can give and also the greatest good we can do for those God has placed in our lives. Amen.