

The joy that nothing and nobody can take away from us

«Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy... For there is born to you this day... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord» (Luke 2:10-11).

This is the strangest Christmas in a long time, full of uncertainty, very sad for many who have lost loved ones, a different Christmas. Grief and anxiety surround us everywhere. We seek, we need, some good news.

A few days ago the stock markets lived a day of euphoria: the proximity of the vaccine lifted people's spirits. Finally some good news! The vaccine certainly brings us closer to the end of the tunnel but... is it enough?

The Irish writer Chesterton compared our life to a circle with two parts: the center and the periphery. In the believer, the center is occupied by joy and sadness is peripheral: we can have bad times, circumstances can be very hard, but at the center of our life there is joy. For the person who does not believe in God the reverse occurs: joy is peripheral and sadness (emptiness) is central; you can have good times, but deep down there is a void because the foundational questions of life remain unanswered.

The joy for the vaccine or any human news, no matter how good it is, will pass because it is peripheral. The real good news, the one that occupies the center of the circle and fills our life is:

«Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy... For there is born to you this day... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord». This is exactly the message of Christmas.

We are going to consider three aspects of the joy of Christmas (the joy of the Christian) by answering three questions:

- **What is it?** Its nature
- **Where does it come from?** Its origin
- **How is it preserved?** Its vision
- Conclusion: **Its result:** brings peace

1. Its nature: it is more than gladness

What is it? Joy is not the same as gladness. The joy of the Christian has a *distinctive nature*.

Gladness is something you feel, an emotion; joy is something you possess, an attitude, even a way of life. Gladness, like all emotions, is fleeting, transient, it depends on the circumstances. **Gladness easily fades but nothing can take away your joy.**

Gladness belongs to the field of the mind, our psyche. Joy, on the contrary, is

a state of the soul; its natural habitat is not the mind but the heart.

Joy is deeper than gladness; it remains even in the midst of grief or sorrow. To our amazement joy grows in trial. What a divine paradox! While gladness grows in well-being, joy is strengthened in trial. I can be crying and keep my joy because tears do not quench joy. Joy is only quenched by bitterness, the fiercest enemy of joy.

That is why today, in this strange and sad Christmas, whatever our personal circumstances we can say: I don't feel glad, but I have the joy of Jesus, I keep that **joy that does not come from within but from above**. This leads us to consider our next question: Where does it come from?

2. Its origin: it is Christ-centered

Our joy is inevitably linked to the star that shone on the day of the first Christmas in Bethlehem:

*«When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy»
(Matthew 2:10).*

It is not the star itself but what the star meant: God has come to this world to die and, through his death, give us life. As the angel announced, **Jesus is Saviour and Lord**. The first reason for our joy is our salvation in Jesus, it is a Christ-centered joy.

This divine origin of joy is made evident in a significant detail: the close relationship between the words joy (*jara*) and grace (*jaris*). Joy is a practical effect of God's grace. For this reason, it is above personal circumstances and it does not depend on them; it is not the result of any human effort, but of God's love; it is not achieved by any relaxation technique but through the resources that come from God.

Let us see in more detail these resources. God's joy flows to us through:

- A **position**: «rejoice IN the Lord always» (Phil. 4:4). To be IN Christ, united to Christ, is the condition because the grace of Christ gives us access to this position.
- A **process**: the transforming work of the Holy Spirit produces joy as part of its fruit (Gal. 5:22).

Being in Christ and letting ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit is the way to be filled with joy. This is our earnest desire and prayer.

The star that shone on the first Christmas will shine even more brightly one day in Heaven when Christ himself will shine his light on us (Rev. 21:23). This leads us to consider our last question: **How is it preserved?**

3. Its vision: it is nourished by hope

Shortly before his death Jesus prepared his disciples to face grief with very moving words: «Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and **your joy no one will take from you**» (John 16:22).

With this amazing promise we reach the core of joy and the climax of our meditation: joy feeds on hope, it is nourished by the vision of the future.

The joy that began with the first coming of Christ to the world, Christmas, will be complete, made perfect, with His second coming in glory, the Parousia. Two facts, two events in the history of salvation, make the magnificent framework of our joy and become its guarantee. This is why Jesus said so emphatically: «You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy» (John 16:20).

The joy of Christ requires an adequate vision. It is the vision of the wise men who «when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy». Joy comes from above, not from within, it. What really lifts our spirit is not the eyes of introspection but the eyes of faith. This is why we need to look up at Heaven.

It is the vision of faith that «sets our mind on things above, not on things on the earth» (Col. 3:2). This was the vision of Moses «for he **looked** to the reward... and he endured as **seeing** Him who is invisible» (Heb. 11:26-27).

The apostle Paul describes this joyful expectancy as a three-fold attitude: «Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer» (Rom. 12:12). What a formidable armour to travel through the path of life!

Conclusion: joy brings peace

Joy is inseparable from peace. It is not by chance that the text announcing Christmas begins with these words: «**Do not be afraid...**». Joy and peace go hand in hand. Joy brings peace and peace increases joy in a divine feedback.

Notice how the sequence of the biblical text confirms this association. The first words of the angel (Luke 2:10-11) are followed by a second memorable statement: «Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, **and on earth peace**» (Luke 2:13-14 NIV).

Jesus is not only the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, and the Eternal Father, he is also the «**Prince of Peace**» (Isa. 9:6). The names of Jesus, a mirror of His identity, culminate with «Prince of peace».

Also the very first words of the risen Jesus to his disciples were «Peace be with you... and the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord» (John 20:19-26 NIV) (notice the Lord repeated these words three times).

Indeed Jesus brings peace and deep joy to our life. Therefore, we do not fear anything because «in all things we are more than conquerors through Him who

loved us» (Rom. 8:37). We go through life not as mere survivors, but as conquerors, conquerors through the grace of Christ.

«When the wise men saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy» (Matt. 2:10). But they did something else. They responded to this vision with worship and gratitude. Their experience and response would be repeated thousands of times in the lives of many others. It is the essence of faith: to glorify god and give thanks to him (Rom. 1:21) because “in the Bible theology is grace and ethics is gratitude”¹.

«Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. For there is born to you this day a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord». This Christmas you may lack happiness, but not joy, you may be anxious, but live with the peace of Christ. Let this be your experience too, let Jesus bring joy to your life this Christmas.

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The web **Christian Thought** gives information about the literary work of Dr. Pablo Martínez and his father Rev. José M. Martínez. Through this work the Christian thought of the authors flows covering a wide range of subjects; theological, psychological and ethical issues are considered from a biblical perspective with a relevant and practical application to current problems.

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¹ Quoted by F.F. Bruce and attributed to Thomas Erskine of Linlathen