

The meaning of Christmas

God has come down to suffer with us

Christmas is a time of lights, but also of shadows. This year the shadows certainly predominate: there is more worry than gladness, more uncertainty than joy. Anxiety and grief hover over many families creating an atmosphere that blurs the festive spirit of Christmas. Many people claim “there isn't anything to celebrate” in a world which is still very much under the destructive effects of the pandemic.

But, is it really true that we have nothing to celebrate? Can the shadows of the crisis quench the joy of Christmas? We as Christians respond with an emphatic “no”. There will always be more joy than worry, more hope than anxiety because our joy does not depend on the changing circumstances outside, but on the unchangeable events that happened that first Christmas. It is the joy of the wise men who, «when they saw the star, rejoiced with exceedingly great joy» (Matt. 2:10 NKJV). Nothing and no one can quench this joy. For this reason we have indeed something to celebrate, actually it is not *something*, but *someone*: Christ.

The powerful light of the Gospel shines amidst so many dim lights. Three names given to Christ reveal the core of Christmas to us and the reason for our joy.

1. IMMANUEL: God has come down to suffer with us

«They will call Him Immanuel, which means “God with us”» (Matt. 1:23).

“What is God doing to remedy so much suffering?” people wonder today. Christmas has a profound relevance for everyone but especially for those who are going through times of suffering and crisis. We remember and celebrate that God has drawn near human beings and has **come down to this world to suffer with us**. This is the essence of Christmas and one of the most distinctive features of the Christian faith: God is not far away nor silent, God is with us. This is exactly the meaning of the word **Immanuel**, one of the names given to Jesus: **God with us**.

In the drama of human suffering, God is not limited to being a passive spectator, but a committed actor. From the beginning of human history He has taken concrete steps to relieve and liberate all those oppressed by any kind of suffering: «I have indeed **seen the misery** of My people. I have **heard them crying out** because of their slave drivers, and **I am concerned about their suffering**. So **I have come down** to rescue them» (Exod. 3:7-8). This commitment of God finds its maximum expression in Jesus' incarnation. Paul describes the

steps that led to the first Christmas in a memorable text: «Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death -even death on a cross!» (Phil. 2:5-11).

God has come down to earth incarnate in Christ. Here lies the ultimate answer to the dilemma of suffering: *in a birth* as simple as it is supernatural, and *in a death* as infamous as it is glorious. The manger and the cross, life at its beginning and life at its end, Christmas and Easter contain the keys that allow us to understand the mystery of life and death.

I personally could never believe in God if it were not for the incarnation, an irrefutable demonstration of God's identification with the human drama, and for the Cross, the supreme evidence of this commitment. As someone said, “a distant God would be nothing more than an iceberg of metaphysics”. God's closeness to us in all suffering is made visible in the Immanuel.

2. THE SUFFERING SERVANT: God has come down to suffer like us

«Comfort, comfort My people, says your God» (Isa. 40:1).

These are the opening words of Händel's *Messiah*, one of the most celebrated compositions of all time. And this is also the opening statement of another even more important “oratorio”, *The Servant's Songs*. This set of prophecies (Isaiah 40-55) announces all the details of Christmas several centuries in advance.

It is no coincidence that the first prophetic words about the birth of Jesus are words of encouragement: «Comfort, comfort». One of the greatest needs of a suffering person is **to feel understood and comforted**. And who better for it than someone who has already gone through a similar experience? As we saw before, no one can blame God for not knowing what suffering is like. During His life, and supremely on the cross, Christ experienced human suffering to its fullest extent, both physically and morally. No one has ever suffered more than Him. In this sense Jesus did not suffer *like us*, but *much more* than us. These sufferings give Him an unquestionable moral authority to understand and comfort us.

The participation and identification of God in human suffering is our supreme source of comfort. In the moving description of Christ's sufferings (Isaiah 53) we find the ultimate answer to all suffering: «He was despised... wounded... bruised... oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter». So much suffering had a purpose: «By His wounds we are healed... After He has suffered, He will see the light of life and be satisfied... and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors».

Because Jesus was an expert in suffering («familiar with pain» - Isa. 53:3), «we do not have a High Priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have One who has been tempted in every way, just as we are -yet He did not sin» (Heb. 4:15). The text here is followed also by a deliberate exhortation to experience the divine encouragement: «Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need» (Heb. 4:16).

Notice however that in the same way God has drawn close to us, we are to draw close to Him; there is an essential element of reciprocity in Christian faith. Christ is indeed with me in my trials, but in order to experience this «*timely help*» (as the original Greek puts it), we have to approach «God's throne of grace». It is the same active step that Jesus requires from us in stating «**Come to me**, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest» (Matt. 11:28). The promise of rest is inseparable from going to Him.

This confidence is what leads us to say: «Lord, this Christmas there are many things I do not understand, but you know them all, you know everything, and if you are by my side, this is what really matters to me».

3. JESUS: God has come down to suffer for us

«And you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins» (Matt. 1:21).

Third and last, at Christmas we celebrate that God has come down to this world **to suffer for us**. The opening words of Isaiah 40 -«*Comfort, comfort my people...*»- are followed by the need for forgiveness: «*speak tenderly to her that her sin has been paid for*» (Isa. 40:2).

Christ came to this world *not only to comfort, but to save*. Here we reach the deepest meaning of Christmas and also the most transcendental: Christ came to die for my sins. This is why the name Immanuel is inseparable from the name Jesus. God has drawn close to be Saviour. The primary reason God had for coming down to earth was «to save His people from their sins» because «there is only one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus» (1 Tim. 2:5).

Thus, the sufferings of Christ, apart from giving him an unquestionable moral authority and power to console us, have an expiatory value for our sins. The coming of Jesus to this world was not primarily pedagogical -to teach us an exemplary lifestyle- but substitutionary, vicarious. We cannot just stay with the empathic Jesus who understands my suffering, we cannot even stay with the Immanuel who sympathizes -suffers with me. All of this is important, but the centre of Christmas lies in the *new life* that Jesus offers to all without exception.

Therein lies the main reason for the joy of Christmas that no crisis can quench: «If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here» (2 Cor. 5:17).

Many people today reject God without having really known him. What they reject is a caricature of God made in *their* image. The God I believe in is the God who draws near to suffer with me, Immanuel; the God who humbled himself and suffered the most ignominious death, the Suffering Servant; the God who died for me, Jesus, who continues to intercede for me and my needs from Heaven. This is my God.

For all these reasons, we celebrate Christmas without letting ourselves be overwhelmed by the shadows of any crisis. The lights of the Christmas message fades any shadow because they give us comfort, hope and above all life, new life in Christ. How much our world today needs the therapeutic balm of the Christmas message!

Dr. Pablo Martínez

Dr. Pablo Martínez is a psychiatrist and he currently works at a private practice in Barcelona. He develops a valued ministry as lecturer and teacher in many European countries on topics like “Mind and faith”, “The therapeutic value of the Gospel in emotional problems” or “Taking care of yourself”. His books dealing with such issues have been translated into 16 languages. He teaches Pastoral Theology and his ministry as a Bible teacher is also very appreciated. He is honorary president of the Grupos Bíblicos Universitarios (GBU - IFES).

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.

*Copyright © 2021, Dr. Pablo Martínez
Integral reproduction, without modifications, of this article is authorized
whenever the name of the author and its source are mentioned
(<http://christian-thought.org>)*