

# Christmas Eve 2017

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I am sure that one thing all of you have at home is a Christmas tree! When I was a child this was something that we was bought and decorated only on Christmas Eve. I would go with my father to buy it and bring it home and then decorate it while my mother put up the other decorations. The custom of having a Christmas tree was brought to England from Germany by Prince Albert in C19 but it goes back a long way. In a little book called 'The Blessing of Christmas' Pope Benedict XVI tells how he visited the oldest Christmas tree in the world at a village called Steyr. In 1694 the sacristan at the church, who suffered from epilepsy, had a devotion to the child Jesus and placed a picture of the Holy Family in a pine tree. Later he heard of an image of the Christ child that had brought healing to a paralysed man. He had a copy made and placed it in the tree. People started coming on pilgrimage and in 1708 a church was built around the tree. Both the tree and the image of the Christ child are still there today.

The Christmas tree reminds us of the tree of life in Paradise in the Book of Genesis. In the dark cold days of winter when other trees have lost their leaves it is alive and green. It is a symbol of the tree of life growing beside the living waters of the river in St John's vision of the heavenly Jerusalem when Christ comes again in glory – a tree bearing fruit all the year round and a source of healing. This is why we decorate the tree with lights, tinsel and baubles – often shaped like apples. On top we have a star or perhaps an angel to remind us that Jesus is the one who is the source of life and healing.

The prophet Isaiah foresees how a shoot will spring from the stock of Jesse. Often this is shown in stained glass or paintings as a tree springing up from a sleeping Jesse with pictures of Jesus's ancestors as fruit and Jesus in the centre or at the top of the tree. We have just heard the story of how Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem the home town of Jesse and King David. The angels fill the night sky with light scaring the shepherds until the Angel reassures them with a message of hope. The glory of the Lord has come down upon them because the Saviour of the world has been born. He brings a message of peace – peace for the whole world.

The Saviour has come not as a mighty warrior but a helpless child lying in a manger. There are siren voices that tell us freedom is the highest value and that it means independence and autonomy. We cannot be free if we are dependent on someone else. Jesus brings a different message. Love is the highest value. Love means I need the other person and his or her goodwill. It turns us away from the isolated freedom of complete autonomy and independence and frees us, in a different way, to fulfil our potential through interdependence, the challenge of both giving and accepting love from another. God himself is love. He did not want to be in lonely majesty as the sum total of existence but poured out his love in creation. We owe our existence to his love. He invites us to return this love by freely coming to acknowledge our dependence on him by kneeling in adoration before the child in the manger. He sends us away with peace and joy in our hearts as a gift to the world around us – a light to shine in the darkness.