

## The source of power, which flows from eternity into our hearts

Christmas Day

Titus 3:4 – 7



*<sup>4</sup>But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, <sup>5</sup>he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup>whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup>so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

There are so many things that can go wrong at Christmas. Have you thought of all the presents? Is that shirt you bought for your friend even the right size? And won't so and so be terribly offended that you gave her a cookbook? And what about Christmas dinner? What if it burns? When the family comes, will we have a peaceful celebration, or will there be arguments like last year? Let's be honest! Christmas, even though it's the most wonderful time of the year, is pretty exhausting! Precisely because expectations are so high and so much can go wrong. And in the midst of this, God is born. A surprising break in everyday life. And a moment of reflection, because what happens at Christmas is, on the one hand, quite normal. Parents are stressed about the birth of their child. And then the child is born. Something completely ordinary, something that happens millions of times every second in our world. And then comes the surprise. The child is anything but ordinary. He is God among us! Our Savior from all the things that burden and weigh us down. The Epistle to Titus leads us to precisely this child with these words: the appearance of "the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior" His words are different from the usual Christmas story that takes us to the manger. Instead, they lead us into the heart of our God and let us see why God became human. And there, Titus lets us see the mercy of our God. We look into God's heart and realize that he knows us. He doesn't just know us, He is truly sorry that we toil so hard and cause so much trouble for ourselves and for others. This message of God's kindness comes at exactly the right point in the Epistle to Titus because the preceding section sounds like pure Christmas stress. It's about what we are supposed to do. It's about our duties in the Church as Christians, and also as Christians in the world. I think we can all sigh deeply now and ask: Have we done enough? This fits with all the unfulfilled Christmas expectations. It also fits with our uneasy feeling on Christmas Day. Shouldn't we be doing more? More for others, and especially more for the poorest in the world? Yes, a lot can go wrong here. Not just in our thoughts, but also in our actions.

God interrupts this uneasy feeling. God also interrupts our failure to be good people. He interrupts this with the benevolent appearance of Jesus' birth. The birth of Jesus is truly a turning point in all our human failings. It's not just about God giving us a little boost in the Christmas spirit or helping us to be better people; something completely new is happening. It's salvation from the hopeless, dark, and unbearable state in which we find ourselves. For us, this love of God is incomprehensible. That's why Titus also speaks of it as a surprising appearance. No one expected it. We are just like the shepherds in the fields, caught up in their daily lives, suddenly seeing a bright light, initially looking up at the sky in alarm, only to ultimately find ourselves adoring before the manger. We may have prepared for Christmas. We may have tried to grasp God, just as we try to grasp Christmas. We want to dictate to him how he should be. If he loves us, then he should finally end the war, etc., if he is indeed a loving God. But God remains beyond our wishes and needs. When Titus writes: "But when the goodness... ..of God... ..appeared," he is referring to the turning point that occurred when Jesus came to us. Jesus' coming was decided in God's eternal plan. And through this Jesus, who does not shy away from the long journey to us, a new beginning is made. This new beginning is precisely that God becomes human. We humans have our expectations of how God should be and, above all, what he should do. But these expectations often turn out to be false, like the false expectations at Christmas. God is not as we think and does not act as we think. This is especially true at Christmas. It is true that there is immense suffering in the world. It is true that we all stand together

helplessly before it and wish that we could do something about it. And what does God do? He becomes a human being. He becomes one of us. He places himself exactly where we are. Yes, even there, and especially there, where people are discouraged and where they have lost hope in themselves and in others. Where they have also given up hope in themselves. The manger, where Jesus lay as a baby, is the place where we meet God. Later in his life, this manger will be located where Jesus, as an adult, encounters the tax collectors, the sinners, and the sick. What is special about this is that God comes to us in a very personal way. Not in a way that should terrify us with fear and trembling, but as a child in the manger. He does not stand against us but intercedes for us. He draws near precisely to those who feel alienated from God, distant, and even hated by him. Jesus does not eliminate all the world's evils. But—and this is certain—he places himself exactly where suffering is. Even where the suffering is deepest. That God becomes human means that since the birth of Jesus, God's view of us will be different. It also means that our view of God will be completely different. Instead of human failure and imperfection, eternity breaks in among us. Instead of loneliness, God is among us. God is among us, even in war and conflict. Instead of strife and separation, he brings reconciliation and love.

That's because Jesus is there. God's kingdom doesn't begin with us reflecting and becoming better people. Nor does it mean that every war and every suffering suddenly ends, but rather that God's kingdom begins with God giving himself to us. In the Epistle to Titus, this new beginning is described in a truly extraordinary way. The new beginning is the “washing of regeneration”. By this, Titus means baptism. For with baptism, the things that happened at the birth of Jesus come together. God travels a long way from heaven to us and pours his love into our hearts. Just as the whole of God lay in a manger back then, so too is the whole of God present at your rebirth in baptism. The Christ Child doesn't just come to the manger in Bethlehem. No, he also comes to you and makes everything new within you.

The beautiful thing about this child is that he is a gift. God gave him out of pure mercy and love. We don't have to earn him at all. We don't have to do anything for him to come to us. He simply comes. And when he comes, something changes among us too. You could say that the things Jesus brings are like a fully decorated Christmas tree. For Jesus has poured out the gifts of the Holy Spirit abundantly upon us. He has even poured out his kindness within us, so that his kindness also makes us kind. Whoever is swept up in this tsunami of God's love and illuminated by his light no longer needs to strive. They don't need to work themselves to exhaustion trying to become the best Christian possible, or even just a good person. The Christian doesn't live by unfulfillable expectations, but by incarnate love, which fills us because it can already draw from abundance.

It is no coincidence that Titus speaks of God's kindness after he has spoken of all our obligations. Thus, he speaks directly into the shattered remains of our disappointment. For it is precisely there that God wants to shine his mercy and love. He wants to shine his light and speak into the places where the Christmas trees have been disposed of, the presents unwrapped, and the hangover of the day after lingers. Yes, to those places where we run out of strength and our last bit of strength is taken from us, so that we can no longer speak of our own strength but of his strength. Amen.