

HOMILY FOR MASS THE DAY BEFORE CHRISTMAS

**Jacksonville Correctional Center
Jacksonville, Illinois
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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers in Christ:

It is good to be with you in prayer on this day before Christmas, when people from across the world will celebrate the birth of our Savior.

Our celebration is summed up in a verse from the Christmas carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, that says, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Him tonight." We wait all year for this day. Whatever our hopes and fears may have been during this past year, on Christmas our hope is strengthened and our fears are lessened, because that is the very purpose of Christ's coming into the world: so that our hope in God would be fulfilled and our fear be transformed into hope.

Like the people of the Old Testament, we may often be tempted to imagine that God has abandoned us. But in his letters, Saint Paul is constantly reminding us, as we heard just a few minutes ago in the reading from his Letter to the Romans, that Jesus Christ is proclaimed to all nations,

including the pagans. We are part of the new inheritance, invited to be brothers and sisters of Jesus and therefore heirs to the kingdom of God. The message announced to Mary is proclaimed again this Christmas and we are called to the obedience of faith, saying “yes” to God as Mary did in response to the message of the angel.

One of the main messages of this Advent season of preparation for Christmas is that God had not forgotten his people. The prophet Isaiah tells the people that no longer shall they be “forsaken,” no longer shall they be forgotten, no longer will their land be “desolate.” Rather, God will call his people his “delight” and he will rejoice in them.¹ These are the words that God speaks to us; these are the words that God wants us to hear sincerely. If you have felt forsaken, if you have felt forgotten, God tells you that you are not forsaken; He tells you that He has never forgotten you.

He not only tells us this, but He has shown us that we are not forgotten. God has proven that He has not forgotten us by sending us a Savior, by sending His Son to live among us and to show us the way to salvation. God proved His everlasting love for us by sending His Son to live among us and to save us from our sins. That is why our fears are transformed into hope.

We can see this transformation in the person of Saint Joseph, who faced an uncertain future when it was discovered that Mary was with child before they lived together. His fears for the future even led him to consider ending his engagement to Mary.

Yet, in the midst of his fears, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and told him four words that would change everything, the same four words that were spoken to Mary in today's Gospel when the angel Gabriel announced that she would give birth to Jesus: "DO NOT BE AFRAID!"²

When those words were spoken to Mary and to Joseph, their fears were transformed into hope. It became clear to Joseph that God had not forgotten him. A further sign would be given to him by the birth of a child by the Virgin Mary, and he was told that the name given to this child would be Jesus, because He would save His people from their sins.

That is the meaning of the name Jesus: in Hebrew it means, "God saves."

Christmas is the glorious reminder that God has been born into the world and that He came to save us, to save us from our fears, to save us from our sins.

The very same words that Joseph heard from the angel are the very same words that are spoken to us today, "DO NOT BE AFRAID!" Allow the Lord to transform your fears into hope. Those who hope in the Lord will not be disappointed.

Christmas reminds us that God, in Jesus, is present in our midst. I have come here among you on this day before Christmas as a sign and a reminder that Christ is in your midst, even here, in prison. God has not abandoned you.

We are sometimes tempted to think or to imagine that Jesus has left us completely alone, that He no longer cares for us, but Holy Mother Church gently corrects this thought and reminds us that

The Lord Jesus, the king of glory, the conqueror of sin and death, ascended to heaven while the angels sang his praises. Christ, the mediator between God and man, judge of the world and Lord of all, has passed beyond our sight, not to abandon us but to be our hope. Christ is the beginning, the head of the Church; where he has gone, we hope to follow" (Preface: Ascension II).

This, then, is the hope that belongs to Jesus' call: to be with him forever in his kingdom!

This is why Jesus gave to the Apostles his Great Commission: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

It is this final command of the Lord that has brought me here to you today. As a Bishop, a Successor of the Apostles, this same Commission has been given to me, and my priests as my collaborators in ministry also share in it. I have come to remind you of Christ’s love and concern for you. He wants you to be with him in His kingdom. I urge you, then, to encounter Him frequently in the Sacraments, especially in Confession and in Holy Communion and to seek always to follow His commands of love.

I also hope that my presence here today is a clear sign and witness to the important place that ministry within the prisons in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois has in my heart. When so many people in society are ready to write you off, as we say, the Church, united with Christ her Head, remains with you. Jesus never abandons you, and neither will the Church, so long as you remain close to her.

I do not want you to lose hope simply because you are imprisoned. The Lord's grace is powerful and effective even here. If we look at the lives of the saints, we see that a time spent in prison was a profound moment of conversion in many of their lives. We think, especially, of Saint Dismas, the Good Thief, who, while hanging on a cross next to Jesus, expressed his faith and his sorrow for his sins, when he said to the Lord: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," to which Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).

Christmas is a time for exchanging gifts. Christ has given us the great gift of Himself. Our gift to Christ is to give Him our 'yes' each and every day. It is not enough for us to have said 'yes' to Him on the day of our Baptism, or when we renewed those promises at our Confirmation and on every Easter Sunday. We are invited to give that 'yes' at every moment of our lives.

In a very tangible way, we are to give the gift of our 'yes' to Christ by accepting Him as He comes to us in others. As He Himself tells us in Matthew's Gospel: "whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). One of the great gifts that we give to Christ whom we cannot see is by loving our neighbor whom we can see. As the

Lord reminds us, our neighbor is not just that person with whom we agree or with whom we like to spend time, but it includes everybody, *especially* those with whom we find it hard to get along (see Luke 6:27-36).

As we continue our celebration, we turn our attention to Bethlehem, which in Hebrew literally means “house of bread.” We are reminded that the Word becomes flesh in a very real and powerful way each time we celebrate the Eucharist, for He comes to us in His Body and His blood. By our partaking of this great gift of His love, we welcome His light into the dark places of our hearts, pointing out the way for us to follow Him. In this bread of life, we are also nourished and strengthened for the journey that lies ahead, and with that strength from on high, we have great confidence that no matter how challenging the circumstances may be or how dark the future may seem, “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it,”³ and the darkness *will* not overcome it.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Isaiah 62:4.

² Luke 1:26.

³ John 1:5.