

FRCN/NTA 2005 CHRISTMAS CAROL SERVICE

National Christian Centre: Sunday 18th December, 2005.

Christmas Message by +John ONAIYEKAN, Catholic Archbishop of Abuja.

1. First of all, I praise the Lord and congratulate FRCN and NTA for organizing again this year what has now become a holy annual tradition: “Service of Nine Lessons and Christmas Carols”. This year’s edition is special, being the first to take place in this new and wonderful National Christian Centre. We thank God who has used many people, led by Mr. President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, to wipe away the shame of the Christian community of Nigeria. This is not merely an evening of sacred entertainment. It is an occasion of praise to our Almighty and Merciful God, and of prayer and intercession for our nation. As this program is being transmitted by radio and television all over Nigeria and even beyond, the whole nation is mobilized in a spirit of prayer and adoration before our merciful Lord and God. We are already in the Christmas mood. “Christ is the reason for the season”; Christ who for all who believe in him is “the Word made Flesh”, the Immanuel: God with us; the Saviour of the world, born as a child in a manger, announced by angels to simple shepherd folk, and manifested by a star to wise kings. What we celebrate is not a myth or a legend. It is an event of our human history, which took place in Bethlehem of Judea, in the reign of the Roman emperor Ceasar Augustus. But it is a special event of history; irrepeatable, once and for all irruption of God’s favor on our sinful world. Although we celebrate this feast every year, its impact is never exhausted, its meaning is ever new and fresh. We have just listened to NINE lessons from the Holy Scriptures - and our hearts are moved by the Spirit of the Lord. The spirit makes known to us the story of what the Lord has done - and imparts on us the message to direct our lives. First the story, then the message.

2. The story of Christmas, of what happened in Bethlehem about 2005 years ago, is of course well known to all of us. But this event has to be grasped within the wider context of God’s eternal plan of salvation. This is amply illustrated by the very appropriate selection of readings we have just listened to. It all started “in the beginning” about which John the evangelist speaks in John 1:1, a “beginning” that preceded the “beginning” of Gen.1:1, the beginning when “the Word was with God”, before anything was made.

3. Then came the other beginning in Genesis 3, “when God created heaven and earth” and crowned his creation with the Man and his wife, our first

parents. It was a story of divine love generously bestowed and tragically betrayed. While evil made its mysterious entry into human history, it did not have the final say. The good news of the gospel already began in Genesis: a redeemer is promised in the offspring of the woman, who will crush the head of the devil. This is our common human history, our shared predicament, our common destiny.

4. God's universal plan of salvation zeroed in on one man, Abraham, at a given point in time relatively recently, less than 5000 years ago. It is like yesterday, compared with what modern science tells us is the age of man on our planet. God as it were picks up the promise of the Garden of Eden with Abraham and his descendants "through whom all the nations of the earth shall be blessed". The scriptures have made it abundantly clear that God has assigned to the children of Abraham the great honor of witnessing to and the heavy burden of carrying the promise of God's plan of salvation for all nations. It is for this reason that Mathew in his gospel traces the ancestry of Jesus, the son of Mary, whose husband was Joseph, son of Jacob - right back to David and Abraham. Indeed, "salvation comes from the Jews".

However, in Jesus, we not only become adopted heirs of the promise made to Abraham, we are given "the right to become children of God". It is not insignificant that also for Islam Abraham is the model of a man of faith. No wonder that we hear often today of a desirable spiritual alliance of the so-called "3 Abrahamic faiths"- Jews, Christians and Muslims, all of whom have high regard for the spiritual figure of Abraham. Surely this has a salutary message for our country Nigeria.

5. The promise made to Abraham was sustained by the prophets of the Old Testament; especially Isaiah, from whose oracles two of our readings have been chosen. Isaiah describes in vivid imagery the expectation which Israel had of the Messiah. "A child is born. He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" - words celebrated in powerful music by Handel. The kingdom of this Prince of Peace will be characterized by justice and righteousness. That is how he will restore the peace and order of the original Garden of Eden: "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat ... and a little child will lead them. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain". Is. 11. All this will happen because "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea". This is all the work of the Spirit of the Lord who acts

in us with his Seven Gifts: Wisdom and Understanding, Counsel and Power, Knowledge and Piety and the Fear of the Lord.

6. When the fullness of time came, God set in motion the process of the fulfillment of his promises. “He sent his only Son born of a woman.” The seed of the woman announced in Genesis came among us. We have heard how this epoch-making event was announced to the “highly favored” woman, the Virgin Mary, who was to play a key role in this drama of salvation. (Luke 1) It was also announced to the young man Joseph, whom the scriptures describes as a “righteous man”, who accepted to play the mysterious role of husband to Mary and visible “father” to the Child Jesus, the Only Begotten Son of the Eternal Father. (Matthew 1) This brings us to the apex of the story, the birth of Jesus, the event of Christmas. This great event was made known to high and low – indeed first the lowly shepherds, who got the news from a choir of angels – and then to the wise kings who saw his star as it rose and took off to seek out the king of the Jews and to do his homage.

7. This is the story – from the beginning until the manger of Bethlehem – and from there until here and now as we celebrate “the Word made Flesh, who dwelt among us”. We too “have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, full of grace and truth.” This is the story. What is the message? Like the shepherds and the kings, like Mary and Joseph, each of us should contemplate the Child in the manger and draw each one his/her own lessons. I will only give a few hints – and that by way of conclusion.

- i. First message: Christmas confirms our faith in the abiding presence of God in human history: Immanuel, God with us. As we celebrate this presence, there are many whose faith in Immanuel is strongly challenged and severely tested. Where was our God in the Saturday night of Oct. 22nd when 117 lives were literally blown to smitherings in the dark skies over the until then little little known village of Lisa in Ogun State? Was our God with us when in broad daylight of Saturday 10th December 103 souls, including 53 of my children of Loyola Jesuit College, and one of my most senior priests, Rev. Fr. Aloysius OBI, CSSp, were roasted alive on the tarmac of Port Harcourt Airport? The answer cannot but be a resounding “YES”. Indeed, our God is particularly present precisely when we feel he is most distant. The same Jesus who cried out on the cross “Eloi Eloi lama sabactani?” “my God, my

God, why have you forsaken me?” was the same Jesus who in a short time later regained his composure and declared: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”. That is the lesson for us.

We pray that all who have died in these and other accidents may enjoy the face of God. We pray for the bereaved: that they may have the faith to bear their loss. We beseech the Lord to protect us from future dangers.

- ii. Second Message: Christmas demonstrates God’s preferential concern for the simple, the poor and the weak. Joseph and Mary had no room in Sheraton or Nicon Hilton. They ended up on the outskirts of the city, like our own recently demolished Chika and other poor settlements, whose defenseless inhabitants have been rendered homeless: men women and children. Christmas challenges us to pay attention the needy in our midst. It is perhaps good to make big plans to take care of the elite who control our resources and can mount pressures on government. But God is certainly not pleased when the poor are neglected and oppressed. For example, we have been hearing much about a “Master Plan” of Abuja. Maybe it is a wonderful. But we plead in God’s name: let it not become an idol to which thousands of human beings are regularly sacrificed.
- iii. Third Message: The Child in the manger is Jesus, the Saviour - the Redeemer and Messiah whom God has sent into the world to restore God’s plan for humanity. The world is full of programs, plans and projects; the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), NEPAD, NEEDs. Right now the WTO negotiations are going on in far away Hong Kong. So much talking and very little concrete results. The world cannot be restored outside of, less still against Jesus’ plan of righteousness, justice, truth, fear of God. Will the world ever learn?
- iv. Fourth Message: God has not abandoned his plan of salvation for mankind. That plan is still on course. Inaugurated by the Saviour Jesus, it continues through the efforts of men and women of goodwill who make themselves available as agents of God’s goodness and love. Those of us who take pride in the name Christian ought to be in the front line of this project. This is especially in the area of the management of our human and natural resources for the common good of all: in other words, the area of politics. In our nation, unfortunately, politics has by and large been given a bad name. It seems to have been hijacked by – or left in the

hands of, people who often do not have the common good at heart. Our political environment is in need of a radical overhauling. We need to abandon the politics of mutual deception, betrayal, selfishness and arrogant sense of immunity, and embrace politics of honesty, loyalty, service and accountability. Such a change requires nothing less than a revolution: moral revolution, spiritual revolution, non-violent revolution, but a revolution nevertheless. We cannot continue to do things badly and expect things to somehow work out well. Actions have consequences and even in politics, “honesty is ultimately still the best policy.”

- v. Fifth Message: We are entering the year 2006, the only full year before the critical election year 2007. That year 2007 will be one more – maybe our final chance to put our system right: and especially hold a credible election, like others around us are doing. Yesterday it was Liberia, today it is Tanzania. We cannot afford another shabby operation. We pray that God will guide us all, especially our leaders. We thank God and congratulate our president, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo who has decided to resist the temptation – which has become a deadly disease of many African rulers – to want to remain in power, by hook or by crook - even if it means changing the constitution. He has repeatedly assured Nigerians - and he is a man of his words - that he does not intend to continue in office beyond the second term of his mandate. Let mischief peddlers therefore stop confusing the people and unnecessarily heating up the polity. There should be no distraction in our single-minded efforts to make 2007 a positive turning point for our nation.

Conclusion:

For unto us a child is given.

He is Christ: the Anointed of the Lord;

He is Jesus the Saviour of the world.

As we rejoice at his birth, let us commit ourselves to serving his kingdom in humility and truth – his kingdom of justice, love and peace.

HAPPY XMAS –AND A BLESSED NEW YEAR.