

CHRISTMAS – MADE FOR YOU

Christmas Sermon 2004 by Rev. Hero Feenders, General Secretary of the German Seamen's Mission

Dear Seafarers

Nowadays, the world does not get turned upside down. The birth of Jesus, at first sight, does not appear to be something to get excited about. It was the same in the time of Mary and Joseph and has not changed to this day. The birth of Jesus does not create any excitement; peoples' attention focuses on other things. And yet I find the world is different during these days: people seem to be in a different frame of mind. Quite inconspicuously something seems to change. I would like to describe it as follows. There is a feeling that our world could look quite different.

Many people, in a very special way, sense that life is not all work, business, job, stress or worries about the future. In these days something touches us, something quite different to our daily routines. You can notice it in the way many people take great care to make these days into special ones. They feel a need for Christmas to be different to a Sunday or a normal holiday. Over and above this they want something new which won't be there again during the year. To achieve this many things are contemplated and pondered upon.

Here in Germany the rooms are being spruced up, special cakes are made, Christmas decorations are put into the windows and candles are lit. In short, people want the atmosphere to be right. The homes must be nice. During these days harmony and peace are supposed to be prevalent in the families.

In other countries people dance around the Christmas tree, they sing or have music. Families meet, and neighbours are also invited. Every country, each culture, at Christmas adds its very own contribution. During these days and their celebration there are special experiences to be made.

This, dear seafarers, I hope will happen for you. On board of your ship, in many cases, something special will be there. The mess room will have Christmas decorations, and there will be a special meal you normally wouldn't have. Maybe you stay together a little longer than usually. I hope then, that you have the chance to celebrate Christmas the way you are used to. If that is not possible I would like to encourage you to tell the other crew members how you would normally celebrate Christmas in your country. Learning about each other's habits and customs helps to a better understanding of us as human beings. Variety and differences are important and knowing about them is exciting.

In the story of the birth of Jesus people from very different cultures and traditions come to the stable.

The shepherds in the fields were people with minds of their own; their lives were not easy. By day and night they were on the move, always being on their guard against attacks by wild animals wanting to tear their sheep. In those days shepherds were seen as daredevil characters one couldn't credit with anything positive. And they wouldn't have been very pious either. At least for synagogues they were hard to reach. But these people were the first to learn what happened at Bethlehem. They go there and are amazed. They become the first witnesses of the birth Jesus and will proclaim it.

Angels appearing in the sky told them. Well, these beings are totally different to the shepherds. They are not earthly beings. They are not robust and not gossiped about by the human beings. The angels are directly from God. Their light shone into the darkness of the fields around Bethlehem and made the shepherds terribly afraid. They speak and sing out of Heaven and proclaim news to the world that will spread like a grass fire: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth.' This sounds so very new; and I hear the news in harmony and full of tenderness: 'I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day your saviour was born – Christ the Lord!'

Later the three wise men from the East arrive. These are men in magnificent garments. In the fields they look somewhat out of place. The beauty and splendour of their garments seem to squash the shabbiness of the stable. And the three men are not too sure what to do. They bring precious objects from their countries unknown to the shepherds, and Mary and Joseph are surprised too. The three wise men are rich rulers and therefore have a status completely different to that of the shepherds and Mary and Joseph.

And there is Joseph. He is a plain man, who does not seem to make sense of the events around Mary and the child. However, he is not indifferent. He makes sure they get safely to Bethlehem. He takes care for Mary to find some warmth and peace in the stable during the birth and afterwards. Nevertheless, he does not say a word. Sitting a little apart lost in thoughts he accompanies the events from a safe distance. At no time he interferes or cuddles Mary or the child. He comes across as a man with a deep understanding of God's undertakings with Mary. God's greatness hushes him and makes him abide in awe. He, Joseph, who has been leading the modest life of a carpenter, an inconspicuous and pious Jew, in God's plan takes on an important role at the side of Mary and the child. And finally, there is Mary with the child. In many pictures of the stable and the crib Mary and the child are not shown as a unity. The child lies in the crib and Mary is looking at it with joy and admiration. She does not carry it in her arms to warm or protect it. She leaves her child in the crib to be admired and adored. Nevertheless, we can presume a closeness between Mary and the child which is greater than the one Joseph is able to show. Mary, with a little pride and gratitude, seems to present the child Christ to the people gradually arriving at the stable. And all of them adore, marvel at the child and give it presents in their very own ways.

Already at the crib the most varied people arrive, and following the unique character of their cultures they act naturally. During the life of the child this will become his trademark. He has an open ear for each and everyone, a caring understanding and a loving heart. The Roman soldier, the Pharisee or the Samaritan, for instance, can experience it. This child, later as a grown up, will be aware of the sick and the outcasts and will help them. Jesus meets women in very

different situations, for instance the sinner and adulterer, or Mary and Martha both competing for the approval by Jesus. He meets them quite naturally, without admonishing them or making demands on them. He will disregard accepted laws, rules and regulations when people's wellbeing is at stake.

Meeting Jesus each and every human being experiences just the extent of love and justice, understanding and help, which this very person requires at this moment in time. The differences are intended, and Jesus restores them to their unique validity.

And exactly this many people in Israel at that time, found it difficult to understand. Therefore, they attacked, persecuted, betrayed and finally brought him onto the cross. However, by his life he put a sign into this world that cannot be ignored: The diversity and variety of human beings and cultures who already meet at his crib. They are his people that he loves and wants to look after – God's children, sisters and brothers.

To this day this moves many people. And during these Christmas days this sign finds its way into the hearts of many people. They allow it to transform them. And they change themselves, as well as some things in their environment. They do this as a sign for this magnificent unlimited love that, without any reservation, accepts and honours every human being.

I wish you a blessed Christmas aboard. Amen