



*2023 Christmas Message of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke,
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**“LOOK, HE IS DESTINED FOR THE FALL AND FOR THE RISE OF
MANY IN ISRAEL, DESTINED TO BE A SIGN THAT IS OPPOSED...
SO THAT THE SECRET THOUGHTS OF MANY MAY BE LAID BARE”
(Lk 2:34)**

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Once again, it is Christmas! That magical time of the year! While we were growing up, we looked forward to it because of all that came with it – *akwa Krismas* (new clothes); *i na unọ Krismas* (traveling to the village for those in urban centres); *nkpaghari Krismas* (Christmas sight-seeing), and the joy, conviviality, and fellow-feeling that pervaded everyone and everything. Maybe children still experience Christmas as described above. However, for many adults today, Christmas is a stressful time. Crushing and widespread poverty has made putting food on the table a difficult affair. The cost of transportation and insecurity to life and property make every movement from Point ‘A’ to Point ‘B’ a weighty decision. Frustration is in the air mixed with a general sense of hopelessness. Yet, we must sing the Christmas carols and wish each other “Happy Christmas!”

The first Christmas was no different. Things were tough. Palestine was under Roman rule. The Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be conducted, and everyone must register in his or her own town (Lk 2:1-4). People had to travel, whether they had money or not; whether it was convenient or not. To fulfil this civic obligation, Joseph took his betrothed, Mary, heavy with child, to Nazareth. On that holy night, the pangs of childbirth came and the king of the universe was born, in discomfoting circumstances, so much so that He was laid on a manger – where animals fed from. His birth was announced to shepherds by an angel: “I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people.” (Lk 2:10-11). What joy would it bring Joseph that he could not provide a more decent place for his son to be born in? Those are some of the contradictions – that is, contradictions to human expectations – in the story of the birth of Jesus which are supposed to jolt us to attention to what God wants to make us understand.

It beats the human imagination that the Lord and maker of all things would choose to become human; even then, to be born as a child – needy and totally dependent.

This is the first scandal or obstacle. Even if this were to be granted, we expect the Lord and saviour to appear in splendour. But God chose to be born in very lowly circumstances. Humanly speaking, we expect joy and happiness to be the outcome of a life of freedom, material abundance and comfort. But the story of the birth of Jesus tells us otherwise. Lasting joy and fulfilment come from accepting the mystery of God's love shown us in Jesus, who has been made both Lord and the anointed one (Acts 2:36). That is why, for example, we wish each other, "Happy Christmas" despite the socio-economic, political and security situation we may find ourselves. In Jesus is joy, happiness, peace and hope.

At the presentation in the temple, Simeon put into words what has been playing out in the birth of Jesus. "Look," he said, "he is destined for the fall and the rise of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is opposed ... so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare" (Lk 2:34). In other words, Jesus was and remains a sign of contradiction to human expectations and ideals. His mission is to reconfigure these expectations and ideals. But as Simeon prophetically announced, Jesus faces opposition in this task not only from his contemporaries but all through history. Those who align with him rise with him while those who oppose him condemn themselves to failure.

As Christians we do not oppose Jesus. We tend to domesticate his teaching. We blunt the edges of its radicalness. Peter is our predecessor in this. Jesus insisted on his followers 'turning the other cheek' (Matt 5:39) and forgiving as often as anyone offended them. This was hard and unrealistic for Peter. Instead of "an eye for an eye" (Matt 5:38) as proposed by the Jews, he felt magnanimous that he increased it to seven. Jesus immediately corrected him: "seventy times seven times" (Matt 18:22), that is, uncountable number of times. As said above, like Peter we compromise and domesticate the teachings of Jesus. This is the bane of our Christianity. The high number of Christians and religious activities do not seem to translate into socio-cultural transformation. Although Christianity is more than an ethical system, true discipleship makes us "salt of the earth and light of the world" (Matt 5:13-14), therefore change agents of the worldly order.

As we welcome the newborn king and saviour of the world, let us allow ourselves to face the contradiction to our human expectations that He embodies. Let us lay bare our hearts to Him; open our secret thoughts to Him and allow him to reconfigure our hearts, thoughts, expectations and actions. This is the way to rise with Him.

Once more, Happy Christmas.

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