

# NEWS OF GREAT JOY!



In a church in the south of Italy, people were gathered for Christmas Mass and the priest was giving a sermon. He recalled a message of joy from the gospel.

“I bring you news of great joy! This is what the angel said to the shepherds and this is what I say to you, my dear people. I bring you news of great joy!”

The priest then compared the joy of Christmas to the joy of exiles who have been told they can return to their homeland. “What news could be more joyful for a nation of poor exiles than for them to be told that a saviour had come and had set them free to return to their own country? This is what I announce to you today. A saviour is born. Jesus Christ is born. He is born to set us free to return to our true homeland, which is heaven. We were exiled from heaven because of sin but Christ has come to tell us that our exile is over. We can go home!”

The priest giving the sermon was St Alphonsus Liguori. He preached this Christmas message over two hundred years ago but his words can still resonate with us today. He spoke of the sad plight of exiles driven from their homes. This is a sadness that is all too common in our own time.

In our own day, millions of people have been driven from their homes by wars in many parts of the world. Sometimes they languish in makeshift camps for years – with a few scraps of plastic sheeting to shelter them from the burning sun or the scorching wind or the biting cold. How they must long for the chance to go home and rebuild their lives in peace and security.



Imagine their joy if one day someone arrived in their camp and announced that the war was over and that they could now go back to their homes and live in peace.

The joy of Christmas is like the joy of returning exiles. The message of Christmas is that a saviour has come – a saviour who will lead us home.

The Scriptures tell us that our true homeland is in heaven. In the letter to the Hebrews we read these words: “They recognised that they were only strangers and nomads on earth ... they were longing for a

better homeland, their heavenly homeland ... there is no eternal city for us in this life but we look for one in the life to come." (Hebrews 11:13-16; 13:14)

In the gospel of John, Jesus speaks of going ahead to prepare a place for us. "I am going now to prepare a place for you, and after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you with me; so that where I am you may be too." (John 14:2-3)

Christmas is not only a time to look back to the birth of our Saviour. It is a time to look forward to the gifts our Saviour will bring in the future. Those in sorrow will find joy. Those who have suffered violence will find peace. Those who have lived as exiles will reach their true homeland.

St Alphonsus summed up his Christmas message by encouraging his listeners to be of good cheer. May his words encourage us as well. "Be of good cheer, because the birthday of the Lord is the birthday of peace and joy."

A blessed Christmas to you all!

*Bishop Paul Bird CSsR*

*Photo 1: "Die Flucht nach Aegypten (Spitzweg)" by Carl Spitzweg - scanned from book. Licensed under Public Domain via Commons-*

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Die\\_Flucht\\_nach\\_Aegypten\\_\(Spitzweg\).jpg#/media/File:Die\\_Flucht\\_nach\\_Aegypten\\_\(Spitzweg\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Die_Flucht_nach_Aegypten_(Spitzweg).jpg#/media/File:Die_Flucht_nach_Aegypten_(Spitzweg).jpg)

*Photo 2: Syrian Kurdish refugees cross into Turkey from Syria, near the town of Kobani. The war that erupted in Syria in 2011 has propelled it into becoming the world's single largest driver of displacement.*

© UNHCR/I.Prickett