

A Thought for Christmas

By Franco Maggiotto

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*“Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign;
behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” Isaiah 7:14*

Many years ago a young priest lived in Jerusalem. His name was Isaiah. He was an important man, used to coming and going to the King's palace. He lived in a society full of abuse of power and hypocrisy, of hatred and violence, like today, and he was no better or worse than the others.

One day something dreadful happened to Isaiah. He had a blinding vision of the glory and holiness of God. The Bible describes it with the worship symbols of the Temple of Jerusalem, so we know only the consequences produced in him by this vision. The life of this young man, at the beginning of a brilliant and promising priestly career, is definitively over. His eyes open suddenly with a lucidity and clearness that he was never able to perceive previously. Now he sees, like in a film, all of his past and that of his people. He understands many things that up to this point he was not able to understand.

But the Lord forgives him and calls him as his prophet among his people. And Isaiah now declares to God, *“I am ready! Send Me!”* (v.8). And yet his preaching will remain unheeded and misunderstood for 40 years because too many lack the eyes to discern, the ears able to understand. Most of the people and their leaders will remain closed, indifferent, and unconscious of their own sickness. For this reason the prophet laments, *“Lord, for how long will this continue?”* (v.11).

As for us, are we aware of the Lord's call? Do we realize that today more than ever believers are needed, like the prophet, who let themselves be put into crisis and changed radically by the Word of God? We who are distressed also ask *“Lord,*

how much longer?” Or do we prefer, like the people of Isaiah's day, to remain in our inactivity and inability to change?

The Lord's response to the prophet is one of an exemplary harshness and realism: **a church that no longer has ears to hear and eyes to understand no longer has a reason to exist.** It has lived its time and the tree without fruit will be cut down. The troops of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, and then those of Babylon, will be the instruments of this cutting. Yet this is still not the final word. In fact, the Lord announces to Isaiah an unexpected hope: from the stump of the hewn tree a shoot will sprout, *“the people of God will sprout again.”* (v.13b)

That sprout, that branch is for us Jesus of Nazareth. In fact Isaiah was seen by the first Christians as the prophet, the messenger of Jesus Christ. He announced the birth of God with us, of **Emmanuel** (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:22-23). He announced in the darkest and most tragic moment the great light that would shine forth on the people who walked in great darkness, because a baby would be and would be called **Prince of Peace** (Isaiah 9:1-6; 11:1-10; Luke 1:79). Jesus Christ is the birthplace of hope that never diminishes. In Him God's promise is fulfilled, the God who remains faithful to His covenant even when the tree of the nation was cut off. In Jesus Christ the hope that removes the last word from desperation and death is established. **This is the message of Christmas.**

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