



# DIocese OF GRAND RAPIDS

*Office of the Bishop*

**Christmas Midnight Mass Homily 2009**  
**Cathedral of Saint Andrew, Grand Rapids, Michigan**  
**Bishop Walter A. Hurley**

For over 133 years people have been gathering on this site at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew just as we do this holy night. They came and we come to celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus, to tell again our story, and to sing our songs of faith in the traditional Christmas carols. We come to celebrate the Eucharist which gives meaning to all we do and all we are. We celebrate that God has come and made His dwelling among us. “The grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ.” (Titus 2:11-13)

Our ancestors in faith brought with them to this cathedral their joys and sorrows, their light and darkness, as we also do. As I was looking forward to tonight’s wonderful celebration with joy and excitement, I came across a recent newspaper article. It was about special programs conducted by funeral homes during Christmas time to help people, who had experienced the loss of family member or loved one during the past year, through their grief and loss. As I quickly skimmed the article, my eyes caught a name that I recognized. It was the name of an 86 year old lady who was the wife of an old contractor friend who had done some work for me over 30 years ago. She spoke of the loneliness of the Christmas season after 63 years of marriage. In one sense I suppose her oft repeated story may seem unimportant, but to me it put a human face on loneliness. It was a reminder (perhaps, because I knew her) that while some of us may sing and rejoice, others will mourn, be lonely and live in darkness.

In the shadows of this cathedral, the homeless and the lonely wander sometimes aimlessly and may find it hard to rejoice. St. Mary’s Health Care, Spectrum and Metropolitan Hospitals are filled with people who are coping with many illnesses that become consuming. Many immigrant families are being torn apart and separated by laws that seem harsh and cruel in a nation of people that once used to say in the word of Emma Lazarus, the Jewish poetess, whose words are engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty: “Keep ancient lands your storied pomp! Cries she with silent lips! Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be set free....”

There are the unemployed and those who have lost homes and savings. There are the abused especially women and children. There are the men and women separated from their families because they are serving in the military or preparing to leave for a war that seems to know no end. Tonight, in a special way, I ask for your prayers for those serving in the military. There are the lonely, both young and old, who feel unloved and uncared for. I invite your prayers for all these men, women and children who find this season painful and difficult. Many are tried to the core of their being and tempted to lose hope. By the manifestation of our love, reflecting the love of God

for us, we pray that all may hear the wonderful proclamation of the birth of Christ—the Christ who takes away our fear, and gives us joy, hope and strength.

Those who have gone before us over these 133 years brought their joys and their sorrows to the Christmas celebrations here at St. Andrew Cathedral. They too lived through wars, depressions, unemployment, strikes, natural disasters, and in the midst of it all they conquered sin, darkness and death itself in and through Christ Jesus and His death and Resurrection. They came here to this cathedral to find light and hope in the midst of the darkness. In simple faith they celebrated as we celebrate the long awaited “For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulders dominion rests. His name is Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

Rather than temper our celebrations, we perhaps need to proclaim not only with our words but our actions: Do not be afraid as the angel announced. The message is a timeless one, spoken to every culture age and generation. We were reminded of that with the wonderful Christmas carols from many nations and cultures that our choir sang—Christ is born, a savior, to illumine the darkness and teach us of the great love that God has for us all.

As we gather tonight for our Christmas celebration, it is easy for us to romanticize the scriptural accounts with our peaceful images of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. We can get caught up in the splendor of the music we sing, the beauty of the decorations that surround us, the family gatherings, gift giving and the wonderful family meals that are prepared. But, the first Christmas was far from idyllic. The Jewish people were under the repressive Roman regime and had little freedom. They were a people who found hope and consolation in their faith, and in the memory of how God had cared for them, as individuals and as His people, throughout the centuries. Like us, based on faith, they continued to move forward into an uncertain future, watching and waiting for the promised messiah. Joseph and Mary gave birth to the Son of God in a stable—and while the angels sang: Glory to God in the Highest and the shepherds and wise men came to pay homage; there was the slaughter of the innocents and the flight to Egypt and later the death and resurrection of the Lord.

In these times and in tragic situations, we begin to understand how much we need a savior and how kind and merciful God is to send us His son to save us from our sins and to help us to cope and overcome evil. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom, a light has shone.” (Isaiah 9:2)

We are that people who live in darkness whether we recognize it or not. We need to let the light of God’s love shine on us to illumine our darkness.

It is a great privilege and honor for me to be the bishop of this wonderful diocese, to celebrate with you tonight as the bishops have done for these past years, and those who come after us. May God bless you all with that light that brightens your hearts, your families and your homes. May you share His love with those around you. May those who need to hear the message of Christmas again or perhaps even for the first time come to understand what it means for them. It is a message of joy to be shared by all people. Please help them. “Today, in the town of David, a savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:12) And with the multitude of the heavenly host let us tonight continue to praise God saying: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” for a light has shone—who is Christ the Lord.