

Christmas Message 2021

Immanuel

A couple of years ago when international travels were free of restrictions, I was on a trip to the Philippines for a retreat organized by the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific. It was September when I went there, and I was supposed to meet with the others in a local mall outside of the Greater Manila. Guess what I heard and saw in the mall? Christmas carols and decorations! I was told that Christmas shopping season started in September in the Philippines! I remember asking if it was not too early for that. "Of course not" was the response. Any chance to hype consumers' shopping psyche would be good for the economy.

Am I hyped up for Christmas? Are you? It is not easy to get hyped up in a world still very much living under the clout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The end does not seem to be readily in sight. Certainly not when the medical world is struggling to understand the power of Omicron, the most recent variant of COVID. Borders are closing up or becoming more restrictive and domestic social activities are more subdued even as Christmas approaches. So, how can people be hyped up to celebrate Christmas?

If Christmas were to be celebrated like a secular festival in the holiday season, which had become the case in the recent past, it would be difficult to do so this year. However, for us Christians, Christmas is the celebration of Immanuel "God-with-Us" (Matthew 1:23), i.e., God intervening directly with the Son of God coming into our human history walking with us, even though we do not see him in physical form today.

God decides to send us His Son to the world to tell humanity how close He is to us and how much He loves us. Closeness and love cannot be substituted with material gifts which, at best, can only be limited representations of friendship or love. The better way to show our closeness and love is to be willing to 'waste' time being with our loved ones without concerning the outcomes. Spending time to "be with" them, listening to them emphatically, feeling for them, celebrating their achievements and failures, standing by them, looking ahead with them and pointing to them the Hope and Love that are of God.

God wants us to be with Him in eternity after this life while walking with us through His Immanuel during this life. We are invited to be God's messengers through our companionship with those who are in need of that. These can be our loved ones, especially our young people, those who are feeling helpless, lonely, and frustrated, those who are struggling with mood disorders, those who are waiting to be pardoned and reconciled, those who are socially and economically deprived, victims of discrimination and injustice, refugees and the socially displaced persons, and the list can go on.

My friends, we can be certain that we have much to give on our Lord's behalf during this Christmas Season and into the New Year. May the blessings of Immanuel be with you and your loved ones throughout this Christmas Season and 2022!

+ Stephen Chow, S.J.
Fourth Sunday of Advent, 2021