

## ***From Bethlehem to Tórshavn - Sinnopskornið Christmas 2020***

It is important to ask yourself how you will enjoy Christmas this year, but it is equally important to ask what Christmas will be like for other people. For example, how are the people of Bethlehem doing this Christmas? That is where it all began! Bethlehem normally has 1 million visitors between Latin Christmas and Orthodox Christmas, a period of about 2 weeks. *This year, there will be none!* The lights will be on the Christmas tree in Manger Square as usual and Masses will be celebrated, but there will be no visitors. In the Christmas story, there was no room at the inn for Mary and Joseph, but this year the hotels and guest-houses will all be empty. *There is too much room!* In many countries church services are not allowed; elsewhere only limited numbers of people are allowed into the few Masses which will be celebrated. Christmas will be much quieter than usual. According to [www.corona.fo](http://www.corona.fo), the Faroese National Church "has decided to cancel all services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. These will be live-streamed or broadcast on public television instead.... The Government advises other congregations to do the same". Members of the parish council have been thinking about this. Here is our Christmas programme. It is a compromise, so nobody will be 100% satisfied, but the first priority is safety, and the second is solidarity with the National Church and Faroese society in general.

### ***Christmas 2020 in our parish***

When we think of a parish, it is easy to focus on the church building and the ceremonies that take place in it, but really the building is a focus and the celebrations of Mass and the Sacraments are a framework on which the life of the parish grows. Please don't misunderstand me! When I call Mariukirkjan "a focus", I think of a beautiful building which gradually becomes holier because of what happens in it; God has dispensed many graces in our church and continues to do so. It was clearer when Mass was in Latin: the priest's last words were *Ite, Missa est*. As one of the lucky ones who learnt Latin at school, I know that phrase really means, "Go. You have your mission". We are meant to take with us all the good things we got while we were in there. If Mass does not transform us, something is wrong - with us, not with the Mass - because we celebrate faithfully what is given to us in the Roman Missal. When people first come to Mass here, it must seem unusual, because at least 3 and sometimes more languages are used. When you hear Deacon Christian saying *Messan er at enda. Farið í friði. Í navni Harrans verða tit útsend*, we are invited to take God's peace with us wherever we go as we go out from our celebration of Mass. Celebrating the Mass ought to affect us and in some way change us; if we go out as changed people, perhaps God will use us to affect other people for the better. *We ought to be contagious!*

You may not always 'feel' the spiritual energy God offers us through the Mass. You may not 'feel' different at all. *Be patient with yourself!* That may help you to be patient with other people, too. Some people come here with a burden known only to them and, perhaps, a few close friends. I hope they feel that praying together with the other people in church gives you quiet but real support. We will never know the suffering hidden in the hearts of some of the people we meet every week at Mass, so please offer a silent prayer to God every time you are in Mariukirkjan for the people whose problems you cannot see. In parishes with many families and small children, I believe Catholic Mass can be a real support to tired mothers and fathers, who can be sure that, even if their children distract them or they just cannot concentrate, Mass is so familiar that they can tune in again at any time.

This is a unique moment in history, I hope. The COVID-19 pandemic has made us all more cautious, which is right. In solidarity with the Faroese National Church, and to play our part in limiting the spread of the Coronavirus, we will not celebrate Christmas in church in the usual way. This does not mean that we cannot have a holy Christmas, because the spiritual energy we gain at Mass in our church also comes from sincere prayer at home or anywhere. Don't forget heaven is never closed. Our church is open every day, so it will be open on Christmas Day! The crib will have been blessed at midnight, so if you wish to visit the crib alone or with some of your family, please do come along. If you come at the times when I am there, I can give you a blessing and Holy Communion. It may be a different way of keeping Christmas, but it is still a way of honouring the child Jesus, Mary and Saint Joseph. I hope God will bless everyone in the parish with health and happiness at Christmas. I hope we can all find ways of celebrating the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Jesus is the Messiah the prophets all foretold. He is God among us, in Hebrew *Emmanuel*. He is a child now, but we who live 2,000 years after His birth know what sort of man He became. We know He is the Word of God who became like one of us. He laughed and cried with His friends. He understood people's needs. He healed the sick. He guided people to love and know His Father. He forgave sins and helped people to start their lives again rather than give in to despair. He suffered shocking pain - but His Passion and death led to new life and the Resurrection. Let us ask Him to bring us closer to Him and to each other.

Christmas traditions are not the same everywhere. In some countries all is quiet until the morning of Christmas Day, while in other places families and friends gather for a special meal on Christmas Eve. Some people are thrilled at the idea of gathering as a family and enjoying each other's company, while others feel the need to go and look after people who are alone at Christmas, perhaps feeding homeless people in a parish hall. There are many traditions, many ways of celebrating the Lord's birth.

### ***A new start in 2021?***

The pandemic has forced us to suspend many of our traditions this year. It has given us time to think, and to rediscover what we really value in this glorious feast. Some people are already thinking of re-organising their lives after the pandemic, making adjustments that help them respect nature as God's creation. Many people have already found different ways of working and studying, which may continue after the pandemic. Some people have started to live much calmer lives. People who have these choices have discovered that, apart from the deadly sickness at the heart of the pandemic, there are different ways of looking at the world and living our lives. Some people do not have these choices, and find themselves in desperate situations: financially, politically, emotionally. Pope Francis has asked us, if we can, to examine our way of life. He hopes many of us will discover ways of living in solidarity with poorer people, with people who - for all sorts of reasons - feel excluded from their communities. He asks us to open our eyes, our minds and our hearts. If we accept his challenge, we still have a few days to look ahead to 2021. Parents and grandparents will want the best for their children. People with businesses will hope the economic challenges of 2020 will soon be memories, so that they and the people they employ will be able to breathe more easily again. Committed Christians will weigh up their relationship with God and try to find ways of listening more closely to His Word, loving Him more deeply in Himself and in their fellow men and women.

We all need God's blessing on our lives, so I suggest we find a moment, as the year comes to an end, to beg the Lord to bless us, our families and those we love, our friends and our colleagues, our communities and the people who govern us. Let us ask for good health, for peace in our hearts, harmony in our families, prosperity for our homeland and peace between nations. Seek the face of Christ and let Him speak to your heart. Let Him love you.

*Father Peter*

*Gleðilig Jól og gott nýggjár.*

*A blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year.*

*Glædelig Jul og godt nyt år.*