



**Catholic Apostolic Church of Antioch
Diocese of Arizona
12455 N. Columbine Drive
Phoenix, AZ 85029-2173
(602) 230-5358**

Most Rev. Mark Elliott Newman, OC
Bishop

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O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

---Philip Brooks 1867

To all the clergy and faithful of the Diocese of Arizona; peace, joy and our apostolic blessing.

Most of you will recognize the quote above as the opening verse of the much loved Christmas hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem, inspired by Brooks visit to Bethlehem in 1865. Its meditative quality transports us back in time and space to that sacred night over 2000 years ago when the Creator of all emptied Himself and took on our human nature. It reminds us that God entered into our lives as God had never done before. God became one of us and a new level of intimacy between Creator and Creation was born.

At the time when God entered into our human condition as Jesus of Nazareth, Israel was full of fear—fear of the Romans who occupied the land and exploited it for their purposes; fear that one might lose one’s property and become part of the indentured masses with barely enough to provide adequately for one’s family; fear that one might violate any of the hundreds of rules prescribed by the Torah and thereby offend God and lose God’s favor. Fear was a constant companion to the people of Jesus’ time and place. This fear was created and exploited by the ruling class—both secular and religious—to keep average people in their place and to assure the privileged position of the power elite.

It was into this social, religious and political environment that the Son of God chose to be born. For in addition to the fear that permeated the average person’s life experience, there was also hope—a hope instilled and reinforced by the prophets that liberation from the oppression and marginalization they routinely experienced would be forthcoming; a hope that somehow, some way, God would free God’s Chosen People and restore their dignity. This hope, this longing for freedom from the oppression of fear, was a condition that

needed to be in place before God could be born into our world. Our God does not intrude; our God does not force God's self into our lives. God enters our lives when the conditions are right, when our hope and our longing for liberation outweigh our fear.

Two thousand years after the birth of Christ, we need to ask ourselves if the hope that was seemingly fulfilled by His coming has significantly changed our world. Sadly, it looks at times like the world is not much better off today than it was before His birth. Foreign powers continue to occupy sovereign nations and exploit their resources; millions of people teeter on the brink of bankruptcy and mortgage foreclosure, putting in jeopardy their ability to provide food and shelter for their families and millions more are subject to rigid and senseless religious rules and regulations that imprison their spirit and keep them from experiencing the joy and freedom that is their spiritual birthright. Fear seems to be the predominant response to life nowadays and hope seems to be all but extinguished. One is left wondering, "Where is Christ, the Hope of the World, in all of this? Is Christ still among us? Is there Hope for us?"

It is tempting to want Jesus to return to Earth and make it all right; to come into our world, take over our affairs and clean up the mess we have made. And, there are those who fervently hope that will happen. But that is shortsighted, for Christ has never left our world, Christ has never gone away, Christ is still among—in His Church, in His sacraments and in us who have been baptized into His life and nature. Christ's presence continues on in us. As Christ's continuing presence in the world, we now are truly the hope of the world. We must no longer sit back passively and wait for a second Advent for the fullness of the first Advent has not yet been realized. Jesus, the Christ, began the process of fulfilling the hopes of the Jewish people—and the hopes of all people—but He left the next steps to all of us who have become his body in the world.

This Christmas, as we celebrate His birth, let us dare to bring to birth the Christ nature within us. Let us let go of any fear that keeps us from taking those next steps and becoming the instruments by which the hope of our world for justice and equality and dignity and peace is finally realized. Having let go of any fear and having embraced our responsibility to become those instruments of fulfillment, let us then work tirelessly, in whatever way each of us feels called, to bring to completion the work that Our Lord began in a manger, one cold night, over two thousand years ago.

As you gather with your friends and family this Christmas, be assured of my sincere wishes for a merry and blessed Christmas. May the joy of Christ fill your being this holiday season. May that joy awaken you to your true self—the Christ, the hope of the world.

In the Light and Love of the Cosmic Christ, I remain your brother,

+Mark Elliott Newman OC
Bishop—Diocese of Arizona