

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way." So begins Charles Dickens' classic work, *A Tale of Two Cities*

Dickens was addressing a time of contradictions. The two cities referred to were London and Paris during the turmoil of the French Revolution. For the oppressed citizens of 18th-century France, the revolution's proclamation of the rights of man was indeed a "spring of hope." But for those of the ancient régime, or the outgoing political system, it was a "winter of despair," leading to death and destruction.

The same was true of the time just prior to the birth of Christ. It was the best of times and it was the worst of times. There was both despair and hope residing in the hearts of the people of Israel. It was the worst of times. The Romans were occupying Israel. Cruel soldiers walked the streets of Jerusalem and they imposed heavy taxes on the people that kept them in poverty.

But it was also the best of times in some ways. The Pax Romana, or peace of Rome, pervaded that part of the world and there was a measure of political stability. Roman law brought order. Progress and commerce came to Israel with the building of Roman roads. Best of all, even though it was a political maneuver, Herod had rebuilt the temple for the Jews. But greater still was the promise of the prophets that God would send Messiah into the world. Holy longings filled their hearts. They clung to the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, which you heard in the first reading of today: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace." The people of God were living with this hope and holding on to the dream of a homeland, which was free, independent and centered on God's law. They saw a united Israel, which would freely and fully worship God. Into this good-times-bad-times-world, Jesus came 2000 years ago.

And today is no different in our world. Our world is no less messy as it was 2000 years ago. There is turmoil and chaos around the world. There is turmoil and chaos in Washington today. Our government seems to never work! Our church never seems to work. We are passing through the nightmare of child abuse and lack of credibility as a people of God. Just today, hundreds of people were killed by a terrible tsunami in the nation of Indonesia, as they celebrated the holiday season. During this week, leading to Christmas our stock market collapsed and one of you told me that he lost 40K. Some of us are anxious and worried, living with fear. Close to home, the devastating fire in California, and each of you can add your own personal woes.

It is also the best of times. Look at you. So many of you are here for Jesus. We still cherish and appreciate our families. Our parish raised over 40K for the fire victims last week. Our Franciscans have opened their retreat center in Danville to house the victims of the fire this week as a gesture of love and hospitality. There is so much goodness in our midst. And each of you can enumerate the good news in your lives. And God comes into our good-times-bad-times lives. He comes to take away our winter of despair, instead becomes the spring of hope.

Saint Augustine said centuries ago, "Our hearts were made for you, O God; they will not rest until they rest in you." They still ring true today. Truth is that we are made for God. God has a special claim on us. Some theologians describe that there is a "God-sized void" within each of us.

As Americans, we struggle with voids. Often we feel uncomfortable with voids. We eat until full. We overload our calendars. We consume in order to fill a void ... but that which belongs to God, can only be filled by God or there will still be emptiness.

And so this evening, I would like to ask you to place your right hand over your heart. And repeat after me: "Our hearts were made for you O God; they will not rest, until they rest in you." Stay with that thought for moment. "Our hearts were made for you O God." There is a place in our hearts for God. In our winter of despair, we have probably filled it with fear, anxiety and worry. Remember, that which belongs to God, only He can fill that void.

And so once again, I would ask you to place your right hand over your heart and repeat after me: "Our hearts were made for you, O God; they will not rest until they rest in you." Yes, our hearts are made for God. This Christmas let Jesus be born again in our hearts. May He fill the void in our hearts!

Jesus comes to us today in Christmas to fill the God-sized void in our lives. Only He can satisfy our inner hunger, and He will. If Jesus is our hearts, then we will have love. If Jesus is in our hearts, then there will be peace. If Jesus is in our hearts, there will be joy. And that is our prayer. Merry Christmas.