



*A message for Christmas 2017
from Karel Choennie, Bishop of Paramaribo*

A joyous message

The announcement

In certain societies – namely in the West – it is customary that when a child is born, a card is sent to family and friends, to announce the new arrival. Two thousand years ago, when Jesus was born, such cards did not exist, but the announcement was done in a very unique way. According to the evangelist Matthew, it was a star high up in the sky, which took the role of the birth card. The news was thus announced over great distances. So great, that all the way from the East, wise men heeded the announcement and got underway. In Luke's gospel, there is a choir of angels who make the announcement to shepherds, outside in the fields of Judah. They too heeded the message and got going.

The effect of the message

What is striking in both gospels is the effect of the announcement of the birth of the Messiah, God's own Son: in both instances, status and distance do not matter at all to the hearers. Both groups immediately set out to follow the announcement. The non-Jewish wise men in Matthew's gospel are not hindered by the ethnic difference between them and the Jewish people, and they are neither daunted by the long distance they have to travel. The sheep herders in Luke's gospel are not held back by their lesser status in the Jewish community of that time and they immediately follow the angels' announcement, despite their apparent uncleanness.

Liberating joy

With only a few words, Matthew and Luke describe what effect the Good News has on people. Precisely that which the message intends to be, is what it does to people: it is good news that fills them with joy. And this is not a superficial, frivolous joy. It is a joy that liberates. The chains with which the world and society binds people are broken at the announcement of the birth of the Messiah: the birth of hope, liberation and renewal. We are chained in this world by the way we categorize one another: according to rank and status, class or caste, nationality and race, or the different colors of skin, politics or culture. Categories that will undoubtedly cause conflict, and reality shows that the strongest will apparently succeed. But the joy of the gospel has the germinative power of the seedling which tears apart the hard crust of the earth.

Sharing the joy

Celebrating Christmas means that we as Church have to keep communicating the Good News of Christ's birth – the birth of hope, liberation and renewal – to humankind and all of creation, over and over again. How effective, then, is the way in which we communicate this message in our time? Does it still have the same effect as the star and

the angels of two thousand years ago? In that time, the message was announced from high above, so that it would surpass all other announcers of (contradictory) messages and not be overshadowed by anyone or anything. How high does this message resound today? Are we as Church going high enough to announce it?

Digital media

In our time it is all about digital media and cyberspace. Our children, family, friends, neighbours – we can reach them all much faster nowadays through Whatsapp, Facebook and other social media. There, in cyberspace, that is where they ‘hang out.’ If, therefore, we want to reach them with this Good News, then we too have to enter cyberspace. However, that is not the challenge. The challenge is to stand out in cyberspace with our message. There, in cyberspace, there is an almost unlimited offer of news and messages – among which there is also a lot of ‘fake news’ – and it can be very difficult to recognize good news. It is a fact that others are much better at selling their goods and services and at making their message much more attractive. That is exactly where the effect of the message begins: with the messenger himself. He needs to be strongly convinced about his own message to be able to announce it as effectively as possible.

Effective announcing

As Roman Catholic Christians we are today the announcers of the Good News of Christmas. That is what we have to be strongly convinced of in the first place, if we want to announce powerfully and effectively. If we honestly consider present day reality, we have to admit that there are others who are announcing their message much more effectively and forcefully than we do: both churches as well as other institutes in society who compete for the interest of the people. And this, while the message we announce supersedes all others in content and value. As Church there is still a lot we need to do to at least match the others in efficacy. We have made some good strides in that direction and we need to hold on to that path and keep following it.

The power of the Word

The message we announce is for all to hear, but not all can or will hear it. That was also the case in the time of Jesus’ birth. When the star appeared above Bethlehem, the wise men from very far away saw it and understood. In Matthew’s gospel there is no indication that others in Bethlehem had seen the star or understood the message, not even Herod. He only found out about it, after the wise men told him. All in Bethlehem were probably too deeply engrossed in their own worlds of worries or pleasures, completely oblivious to the message that was announced from high above. Ultimately, the message did reach them, but that is how it sometimes goes when we have something important to share: people’s ears will not always be attuned to us, or our audience might not even consider our message worthwhile. But the message will go around nonetheless and arrive ultimately.

That is the power of the message we proclaim: it is not our message, but from God himself. He will make sure His message is heard. Because with His Word it is like what the prophet Isaiah says: *“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it”* (55,10). We merely need to be convinced of that message

and persevere in proclaiming it, in the strongest and most effective ways we have at our disposal.

Announce the Good News of the birth of the Messiah: hope, liberation and renewal! Announce it with your mouth, in writing and through cyberspace! But above all: believe the Good News, and announce with power and conviction!

A joyful Christmas to all!