

Christmas Message 2009

from the World Council of Churches general secretary

He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers –
all things have been created through him and for him.
He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
Colossians 1:15-17 (NRSV)

Light is the radiant image of God's goodness, in creation and at Christmas. The Creator commands, "Let there be light!"¹ – and the universe takes form. At the nativity of Christ, light breaks forth in the midst of darkness – and the darkness can never overcome this glowing testament of the living God.²

Christmas is a season to sing praises,³ yet in our time the reality of environmental destruction undermines the doxology of creation. The singing of the spheres is obscured by pollution and manufactured noise, the rhythms of the sea are disturbed by climate change, the beauty of many manifestations of life is disfigured by abusive practices rooted in greed. And as the earth suffers, so must its inhabitants. Already, the poor and other socially marginalized people find it ever more difficult to lift their voices in song.

In the days of Mary and Joseph, the emperor Augustus believed power rested in his hands alone. He decreed that "all the world" (the biblical word is *oikoumene*)⁴ should be taxed, and an obscure couple made their way toward Bethlehem. Yet God had another purpose in history, and now we realize that thrones, dominions, rulers and authorities were acting unwittingly in fulfillment of prophetic imperatives. It is Christ, not the emperor, who is truly "before all things, and in him all things hold together".⁵

Biblical scholar Barbara Rossing suggests that the old, imperial *oikoumene* of Caesar – along with modern economic, military and political empires – is perishing. Yet the prophets and apostles assure us that God's creation – a true *oikoumene* comprising the household of God – will be transformed.⁶

¹ Genesis 1:3.

² John 1:4-5.

³ Luke 2:14.

⁴ Luke 2:1.

⁵ Colossians 1:17; Psalm 2:7-10.

⁶ Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21-22.

And so we pray for change and offer ourselves as instruments of transformation.⁷ We live in faith that, in the coming of Jesus Christ, there is a new creation in which the hope of the angels' song comes to fruition – God, humanity and all of life shall be reconciled.⁸

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This message is also available in German, French, Spanish, Korean, Arabic, Portuguese, Russian and some other languages at the website of the World Council of Churches (<http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=7307>).

⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:16.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:17-20.