

A Prayer For Christmas

by **TIMOTHY SHRIVER, Chairman of Special Olympics**



This Christmas, one might be forgiven for praying for the second coming of Jesus rather than for the joy to celebrate his initial appearance 20 centuries ago. Taking the long view of history, you could argue that we have collectively proved how inadequate we are in fulfilling the Bethlehem announcement of peace and justice. While we celebrate the mystery of God's coming in human form, can't we also pray for an expedited return?

That type of prayer would give many Christians common ground with our Jewish brothers and sisters during a season when we otherwise seem to part ways. We both want the Messiah to come; is it such a big deal whether we want Him for the first or the second time?

This is how I felt last month when I met Lior Liebling, a 16-year-old Reconstructionist Jew from Pennsylvania. While Lior was preparing for his bar mitzvah three years ago, he had two hopes: He wanted his mother, who died of cancer in 1997, to return. And he wanted the Messiah to show up with her.

I wish I could pray with the raw honesty of Lior Liebling.

Some may dismiss his wishes as fantasy or attribute them somehow to his having Down syndrome. Lior was born with that chromosomal variation, but his prayers are no more fantasy than the great verses of the Psalms or the cathartic visions of the Book of Revelation. Indeed, Lior was not praying for a special request but for God's presence, which would heal all sorrow and pain. Isn't God's presence the purpose of all prayer?

In the run-up to Christmas this year and in so many years past, religious leaders have implored us to bypass the commercial elements of the holiday. Accordingly, if even for a moment, why not make today a day to pray?

Lior prays in his room and in his back yard, at night and during the day. He prays by reading the Torah and by attending services. I imagine

that Jesus might have been very similar in his childhood.

Lior exudes what the author of the "Cloud of Unknowing" called "a loving blind desire for God." He seems lacking in presumption, arrogance and sectarianism. His prayer is filled with anticipation and desire. He wants his mother. He wants God. How much simpler can prayer be?

On Christmas, that is a prayer befitting Christians. For it is not in satisfaction with the birth of Christ that Christians pray. "God alone suffices," St. Teresa of Avila wrote, and our goal should be to express our longing for that same divine sufficiency every day. Prayer doesn't have to be filled with words. It can be simply naked intent. It can be simply love.

Christmas may seem an unlikely time to be calling for common prayer between Christians and Jews, but maybe the great festivals of our respective traditions, when rethought in terms of the inner life of prayer, shouldn't be a time when we disappear into our respective churches, synagogues and mosques. In a time of religious tension and factionalism, it is most important that even the most conservative interpretations of religion be complemented by prayer. Couldn't prayer be a common ground?

It's time for a rethinking of the inner life of prayer.

Last month, when I saw a film about Lior's journey, "Praying With Lior," I could scarcely contain my emotion during the scene when he stood to read the Torah in front of his congregation, just as Jesus did 20 centuries ago. Lior read and he spoke and he danced and he smiled. The congregation wept. His family wept. As I watched, I wept.

It would be presumptuous for me, a Christian, to impose my interpretation on the solemn ritual of bar mitzvah. But I can share my experience of watching Lior. He prayed for the Messiah with love and hope and a terrifying honesty.

As I pray on this Christmas Day, I will try to do the same.