

Christmas 2020

I take as my text, from St. Luke's narrative of the birth of our Saviour:

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight O' Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.

Just a little more than two thousand years ago, the world experienced an event unlike any before — one of the most joyous events imaginable for humankind — the birth of a Saviour to redeem the world. What makes it truly unimaginable for us human beings is that that Saviour is God. Yes, God who is responsible for all of Creation.

Working in ways that are a mystery to humankind, God entered our world — entered into our time — so that we could see and experience him in the only way possible for us to do so, in a manner that we could understand, by being among us. And in doing so, he allowed himself to experience all that we humans experience, all the emotions, all the pain and suffering. He became one with us so that we could become one with him.

His birth to a Jewish maiden on that first Christmas is the most beautiful event ever to take place on earth.

Now, here we are on Christmas Eve, just a week away from the end of what has been such a chaotic year, affecting each of us in various ways to different extents; indeed, for many, it has been lifechanging.

For the Church in this country, it has been similar to a reformation, in ways reminiscent of the Protestant Reformation that was history changing. While we have come together to worship God in the Beauty of Holiness, it is in a setting unlike the past years, stripped of music and almost devoid of congregants.

While there is joy in the midst of this Christmas celebration, there is also a sense of despair and solemnity. Here we are, celebrating the birth of hope, a new Light in the world, and the fulfillment of a promise made; yet a gloom lingers just outside the church doors.

Yes, so much has changed in our lives over the past year, in the world around us, even more now than over previous years. I am not sure where to begin, except to avoid the inevitable discussions that are occurring in families, and to focus on the significance and beauty of this wonderful event we have come to casually refer to as Christmas.

This is the Eve of our Lord's Birth; here, amidst the holiness, it is time to put aside the din of a secular world and focus our attention on the Nativity of our Lord and its true meaning.

We hope, and pray that, just as we do, the world will take pause on this night, even if only for a moment; just a moment, let all of creation take a deep breath.

Wherever I am, Christmas is a time of quiet excitement; excitement because of the joy of this singular event that is being shared by people around the world; but quiet in reflecting on the beauty and the awesomeness of what happened a little more than 2000 years ago, when God himself took our flesh upon himself, and became one of us.

St. Luke, with simplicity and beauty, tells us the story of the Incarnation, the Birth of Jesus. St. Luke relates the event in such a manner that it becomes evident to the reader that his information must certainly have come from Mary herself.

Some Biblical researchers and some skeptics have cast doubt on the accuracy of St. Luke's account of the Nativity, centering their criticism on a few discrepancies which differ from the secular records of the time, discrepancies which, when viewed in a broader context, do not detract from Luke's narrative, after all we are all human.

That Cyrenius was an historical character in play at that time is not questioned. That a census and taxation of the Jews would have been undertaken at that time was not at all unusual, in the course of events.

That it was Herod the Great who ordered such a census and tax, under the authority of Caesar Augustus, is not without evidence.

These detractions are a matter of what scholars are about in their pursuit of the understanding of history, not necessarily in the understanding of religion.

So, Mary and Joseph make the journey to Bethlehem to fulfill the requirements of the census, and to be taxed; she in the final stages of pregnancy, either walking or riding on a donkey, for a distance of, perhaps, 30 miles. The time of the year would most likely have been autumn, for the sheep were still grazing at night, and had not been brought down from the hillside pastures.

As the two weary travelers entered Bethlehem, they found the town crowded with visitors complying with the census. For lack of lodging, as Luke tells us, Mary and Joseph had to spend the night in a stable. A stable in that time could well have been hewn out in the bed-stone or made of stone, rather than a barn as we might envisage in our day and time. Wood for building was scarce, and stone was plentiful.

Thus, we can picture the scene of Mary and Joseph resting amid the animals in the stable, using fresh hay to provide warmth, and a soft place to make a bed. Mary, exhausted from making such a long trip, gives birth during the night. For lack of any other suitable cradle, she wraps her newborn Son in swaddling clothes, or strips of linen, and places Him in a manger, softened with the hay.

The beauty of this scene can only be matched by the beauty of the message it gives to us: in the fullness of time, God showed His perfect love for us; in perfect humility, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was conceived and born of the Virgin Mary.

God, thus condescended to become one of us, for the purpose of being our Saviour. He condescended to become as one of his Creation to experience what we as human beings experience — our pain, our emotions, our fears, and even our doubts.

As we read the four Gospels, we see in them God Himself revealed to us through His Son Jesus Christ. We see that He is personal, not just an idea or image.

In Jesus Christ we see a God of order and justice, a God of Love, and a God who knows by His own experience what it is to be a human being.

Jesus Christ came into the world first and foremost to be our Saviour. He did not come into the world to be just a teacher, although His teaching is unique, establishing a moral ideal different from any other moral ideal. His express purpose, his only purpose, was to redeem mankind and reconcile all Creation to its Creator.

This Messianic concept was so different from the expectations of the Jews. They were eagerly awaiting a Messiah who would be a great and powerful personage; one who would deliver the Jewish nation in a temporal, rather than spiritual sense.

But it had been long before appointed in the eternal counsel of God that, in order to save us, to redeem us, to reconcile us to himself, He had to become one of us. And that is the very heart of our faith, the very heart of the Incarnation: a mere man could not have redeemed mankind. Only God, having taken on our human nature, could effect our redemption, and then only by sharing our human suffering, to the point of dying on the cross

What we are celebrating at Christmas is unique; for once, and only once, did God take on human nature of the Blessed Virgin. This is not something that was ever repeated or would ever be done again. Jesus Christ is not just one of the prophets or a great teacher; He is God and man.

In commemorating the wonderful Birth of Jesus Christ, we can find no other event, save His Death on the Cross, with which to compare it, and which elicits such deep love, devotion, and adoration.

It is astounding: first the Angel telling Mary that God had chosen her to be the mother of His Son; the journey to Bethlehem where Mary and Joseph could find accommodations only in a stable; then, the wonderful Birth of the Baby Jesus announced to the shepherds by a chorus of Angels:

Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

The shepherds made their way to the stable, and found it just as the Angels had said, Mary and Joseph, with the Baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.

Can you imagine a multitude of the heavenly host singing the Gloria in excelsis? Each time we rehearse those majestic words, we too are joining with that heavenly host to give glory and praise to God for all His wondrous works, and especially to give thanks for that glorious event.

No matter how complex the theology of the Incarnation may be, or intense the efforts to discredit the Biblical records, nothing can ever overshadow the simple beauty of that singular event in all of history: the birth of the eternal Son of God, in the most common of circumstances, to loving parents, who, not fully comprehending the enormity of the event, nonetheless, put their faith in God and willingly became instruments of His Peace.

We, today, have the opportunity to be instruments of that same Peace with Mary and Joseph as examples of their selfless love of God and the power of faith.

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