

Chapter 3: The Christmas Story

1. Introduction:

WE prepare for Christmas in the weeks preceding it. We decorate the Christmas tree, buy gifts and clothes, prepare food – but our real preparation is in penance, prayer and meditation on this great celebration. Joseph and Mary led a life similar to the life in any village we know today, preparing for their forthcoming newborn child. When the Emperor Augustus decreed a census, Joseph and Mary travelled south to Bethlehem to register and, during those days, her time came.

What does the Christmas Gospel mean to us? How important is the incarnation in the history of humanity? How does it relate to us? Today's talk will focus on God appearing to us in the form of a child. This is what prompted St Thérèse of the Child Jesus to say: "How can anyone be afraid of a God who became a tiny baby?"

2. Reading and Understanding the Gospel

The Birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1-20)

¹Now at this time Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken. ²This census –the first– took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, ³and everyone went to his own town to be registered. ⁴So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and travelled up to Judaea, to the town of David called Bethlehem, since he was of David’s House and line, ⁵in order to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶While they were there the time came for her to have her child, ⁷and she gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn. ⁸In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night. ⁹The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. They were terrified, ¹⁰but the angel said, “Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹²And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly with the angel there was a great throng of the heavenly host, praising God and singing: ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest Heaven, and peace to men who enjoy His favour.” ¹⁵Now when the angels had gone from them into Heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they hurried away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about Him, ¹⁸and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds had to say. ¹⁹As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; it was exactly as they had been told.

2.1 Explanation

The story of Christmas carries important theological meanings, which are found in its historical, geographical and personal details. Historically, many concepts are turned upside down: Caesar Augustus, who had ordered the census, is no more the focus of attention, as the newborn baby grabs the attention, being the Messiah.

Geographically, focus shifts from the Roman Empire and the Syrian province to Galilee in Judah, and to Bethlehem, the town of David, where Jesus is born in a manger. The Gospel gives a clear reason for that: “because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). At a personal level, we find the Holy Family – Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus – and a company of heavenly angels who meet shepherds from the fields: all these individuals represent one single family.

The Gospel calls the newborn infant, the “firstborn” (2:7). Indeed, the firstborn is the one who opens the womb of his mother, whether there will be a second or thirdborn siblings. The “brothers” of Jesus mentioned in the Gospel are not His physical brothers, since we know who their mothers are (Mt 27: 56). According to Jewish tradition, the first-born was offered to God and was redeemed with sacrifices and offerings in order to be brought back safely home (Ex 13: 2-12). Joseph and Mary needed a strong faith to see, in this tiny infant, the Messiah, the long-awaited Saviour. Being born in a manger poorly fitted the many prophetic miraculous images of God in the Old Testament. Here God appears in the form of a tiny baby, in the middle of the night and in utter isolation. He appears poor and humble, God hidden in human form: this is the Word of God become flesh. Despite this humble appearance, Joseph and Mary are awestruck before this mysterious child, because they come from the poor people who have long waited for redemption. Their faith helps them, in fact, to discover God’s might made flesh in His immense love for humanity.

Angels are God’s servants and His messengers who deliver Good News to His people. They appear in their usual manner:

- They worship God constantly and sing hymns to Him
- They share the joy of Heaven with us humans
- They announce to the shepherds the news of the birth of God in a manger
- They have not invited the rich and powerful to bow low before Him who has fulfilled the promises. Indeed, the high and mighty would refuse to enter into a humble cave, just as later they would refuse to believe in a Messiah hung in humiliation on the wood of the Cross.

Only the shepherds, humble and poor, are the first witnesses, worshippers and evangelists. They represent the little children to whom God reveals the mystery of His kingdom (Luke 10:21). Every poor and humble person throughout history shall be like these little children, those privileged to receive the revelations of the mysteries of God and of His Salvation. Thus, the hearts of the faithful overflow with great joy; the shepherds returned praising God after they had seen the child Jesus sleeping in the manger. And all who heard them were amazed.

2.2 Summary and Practice

Christmas, the birth of Christ, is the story of the union between his divine and human natures. St Paul declares of Christ: “His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are” (Phil 2:6-7). When St Peter called to believers to stay away from the corruption of lust, he set the ultimate goal to follow: “In making these gifts, he has given us the guarantee of something very great and wonderful to come: through them you will be able to share the divine nature and to escape corruption in a world that is sunk in vice (2 Pet 1:4). God became man to raise man to godliness, raising him up from worldly concerns.

The Holy Family experienced difficulty in travel and poverty in childbirth. And so, the birth of Jesus invites us to live poverty through free choice and to keep our distance from frivolous spending. The act of freeing ourselves from worldly things helps us to become more attached to Christ and to share the sufferings of others. Indeed, how many migrants and displaced refugees have the same experience as the Holy Family, who moved on from Nazareth, to Bethlehem, into Egypt and back to Galilee. Our solidarity with our poor brethren should make us reflect that, often, we have more than we need, while many poor people in the world lack the necessities of life and much of what we have readily at hand.

The experience of the shepherds teaches us that meeting Christ really changes our life. The shepherds were in a state of deep fear (2:9). After they had met Jesus (2:16), they returned full of joy, glorifying God (2:20). We too, in our turn, should seek to meet Jesus. Let us hope that the Christmas Crib that adorns our homes and churches becomes a place where we may worship before the Baby Jesus, in prayer and meditation. Whoever meets Christ will have his life transformed and will become, like Him, a bearer of the Good News.

3. Theological and Spiritual Teaching: The Mystery of Incarnation

God, who is above all and greater than all, has not willed, in His incomparable love, to remain in His distant Heaven, existing apart from and indifferent to the problems of the world. He wished to share the life we live so that we might share in our turn His riches and His divinity. And that He might share our sufferings, He sent His only-begotten Son, equal in all things to Him, to become Man among us, Emmanuel, God-with-us. He granted to his disciples to share his life so they could learn from him and from the truth he disclosed, epitomized in his greatest act of love on the Cross and his glorious resurrection from the dead.

In order to understand this, we human beings need that knowledge to spread throughout our senses. God respected the human nature He created and agreed, in His immense love, to come into relationship with us. And so He sent His own son to live among us, whom we have seen with our own eyes, heard with our own ears and touched by our own hands (cf. 1 Jn 1:1).

For God so loved the world that He sent His only son to become man, resembling us in every way, except for sin; living as we do, experiencing death and burial in a tomb. It is why He has granted us eternal life through the resurrection.

What does it mean that the Son of God became man? It means that He lived among us for thirty-three years, as a man like us. We must not forget, however, that he kept his divine nature throughout His earthly life, manifesting it in its full glory at his resurrection. On earth, he could be seen performing miracles, talking with God His father, and saying that he was greater than the Temple and the Law of the Old Testament. Indeed, He is God's true Word, definitive and complete, who was with the Father from all eternity, before the world was made.

Across its history, the Church has been fully aware of the dimensions of divine love and has preserved the term "mystery" for the incarnation, respecting the richness of this reality, which remains beyond the capacity of our human minds to grasp. So, we understand it as far as we are able; we rejoice in this reality and live in it, despite the fact that it transcends our actual understanding. We enter into this reality day after day, we are nourished by it, yet we cannot exhaust its truth. It is in this sense that the Church speaks of certain "mysteries": of the incarnation, of the redemption and of the Trinity, all revealed to us by the Lord, but impossible for us to grasp fully as long as we journey in this world. We await the moment when we will meet God face to face when "we shall be like Him because we shall see Him as he really is" (1 Jn 3:2).

4. Reading and Meditation:

A reading from St Maximus the Confessor (580-662)

The Incarnation remains a Mystery

The Word of God, born once on the level of the flesh, is always born willingly for those who desire it on the level of the spirit, because of his love for men. He becomes an infant, forming himself in them by the virtues; He manifests himself in just the measure of which he knows the one who is receiving Him is capable. It is not through any ill-will that He diminishes the manifestation of His own majesty; it is rather that He weighs the capacity of those who desire to see Him. And so, though the Word of God is always manifested in the life of those who share in Him, yet because the mystery is transcendent, He remains always invisible to all.

A star from the east appears by day and guides the Magi to the place the Word has taken flesh. This conveys a hidden meaning: it shows that the word of the law and the prophets surpasses the experience of the senses, and guides the gentiles to the greatest light of knowledge. The word of the law and the prophets, like a star devoutly observed, is a clear guide to the knowledge of the incarnate Word for those who are called according to God's purpose by the power of grace.

God becomes perfect man, then, leaving aside no element of nature – except sin, and this does not belong to nature. He offered His flesh as a bait, to provoke the insatiable dragon to devour the flesh which he was greedily pursuing. This flesh would be poison to the dragon, destroying Him utterly by the power of the divinity in it. But it would be a medicine for human nature, restoring it to its original grace by the power of the divinity in it.

The great mystery of the divine incarnation always remains a mystery. In His essence the Word exists personally in the Father to the full: how is He in His person essentially in the flesh? How can the same person be God by nature and become fully man by nature, in no way deprived in either nature, neither in the divine nature by which he is God, nor in ours by which He became man? Only faith can grasp these mysteries, since it is the substance of things which are beyond intelligence and reason.⁶



⁶ St Maximus the Confessor, Cent.. 1, 8-13, cit *The Divine Office*, Vol. 1.