Xmas(2020)

*"Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."*

When St. Paul set out to spread the Gospel to the known world the Roman Empire had several interconnected, undergirding characteristics. First, peace and stability reigned within the Empire. Commerce flourished due to the absence of borders and the presence of Roman roads.

But these depended upon high taxation and oppression. Publicans collected huge taxes which were enforced at the end of a Roman sword. All who displeased Emperor had short lives. People who were not citizens endured gruesome deaths or gladiatorial combat or ended as appetizers for animals.

Human life was very cheap, until a strange light appeared in the sky which drew the attention of astrologers. A group of them set off from Mesopotamia to see what it might lead to. It lead them to Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem where shepherds watch the sacrificial flock for the Great Temple. The Temple was the only place sacrifices could be done.

Suddenly, an angel appeared to these shepherds and gave them a message explaining the meaning of the star: behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Not far from the Roman Coliseum perched on the edge of the remains of the imperial Forum, stands today the church of *Ss. Cosmas & Damian*. This building originally was a pagan temple until becoming a church in the 500s.

It is a magnet for tourists who come to gaze at the stunning mosaic of Christ flanked by saints on the ceiling behind the altar. But the church also houses another big attraction. Near the entrance is a beautifully carved creche from Naples dating back to the 18th Century.

Neapolitan creches are not so much those of stables as those of hillside villages. The one at *Ss. Cosmas and Damian* fill a small room. While modern creches focus exclusively upon the Holy Family, the shepherds, Magi, and cows and sheep, Neapolitan creches show the panoply of life. It doesn't just show holiness and calm. It shows busyness and ordinariness as well.

An entire village may be depicted with shoemakers, butchers, knife-grinders and blacksmiths. People are seen eating and drinking, chatting, sleeping, shopping, carousing, and even arguing.

Then, somewhere amidst all this everyday life, almost hidden, one can find a simple nativity scene of the manger. There in the midst of everyday human village life you can finally find a mother and father watching over a newborn child. Onto the stage of everyday human existence has stepped the Almighty God, the Prince of Peace, the Word made flesh.

The first nativity creche is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi back in 1223, almost 800 years ago. He made it by hand. This was after he had turned away from this world and his wealth.

A few years ago there was such a creche on display in the White House. It was loaned to the White House during the Kennedy administration, but didn't become government property until the end of the decade. It is a 300 year old hand carved Neapolitan creche about 5'x5' which then First Lady, Melania, brought out of moth balls.

St. Luke's much beloved account of Jesus' birth captures a timeless truth. In the words the angel gave the shepherds, the **birth** of Jesus is a sign for us. He is our Savior.

His birth is a sign of God's **love** for us **and** faithfulness that the long expected Messiah **did** come to earth. It is a sign that God has made holy human life by becoming one of us, becoming human while remaining God. Such love means we never have anything really to fear since God loves us, and always will.

Into the poverty of a stable, the simple-ness of a feeding trough, as a fragile human baby, a savior has been born for us and for all people for all time. His coming is echoed again this year, as every year, in our Christmas liturgy which, while varied in outward appearances is happening in myriad places around the world as we speak.

Into poverty, simple-ness, and fragility is Christ born for us today. Into the neighborhood of war, violence, and injustice is born the Prince of Peace. Into the neighborhood of illness, anxiety and sin, he comes to give us hope and healing, security and forgiveness. Into the neighborhood of our lives, Christ is born to bring courage, joy, hope, and reconciliation.

This is the Good News that God destined to share with all people. Whether one be shepherd or king or **three**, all can be reconciled, all can experience the Good News by leaving the outside, everyday world and coming into Jesus' manger.

Jesus' birth in a simple manger placed another world, the eternal divine world, smack within the Neapolitan creches of our lives. Just as with these creches it is often not easy to find Jesus in our lives. The busyness of life is everywhere and many about us carry on as if Jesus isn't around at all.

It is into our often disbelieving world that Christ was born: to reassure **us** of whom he is and where he is. Our celebration of Christmas reaffirms us that God didn't send his son to condemn us, but to save us, because God made each of us to reflect Himself when he looks at us. Christ's birth in the manger was the opening of the divide between two worlds, made evident by immortal angels singing to ordinary mortal men.

In Christ, God is always with us--in our fears and worries, in our losses and all that makes us less than perfect. The presence of God may not always appear obvious to us, just like in a Neapolitan creche, but it is always there and always at work, always available to any who seek. Anyone who searches away from the ordinary world can find the Prince of Peace not far away.

As we reflect and gaze upon any nativity scene, let us be certain that the Christ who was born in Bethlehem is with us always, "till the end of time". In the out stretched arms of an infant baby we see the arms which grew to stretch-out upon a cross. In this new birth in a stable we see the one who later was born **anew** by rising from an empty tomb. As we ponder, may the words of the angelic host fill our minds and hearts: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace good will towards men."

Merry Christmas to you and your families. Amen. +