

AT THE SCENE OF THE NATIVITY

Isaiah 52. 7-10

Titus 2. 11-14

Luke 2. 1-14

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Happy Christmas, everyone! It is a great joy for me to be with you on this holy day as we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord and his coming to earth in the form of a small, new-born baby.

Here at St Stephen's, we have a very beautiful representation of the nativity scene to the right of our chancel steps. I wonder, have you heard how nativity scenes¹ first came about? St Francis of Assisi is credited with creating the first nativity scene in 1223 at Greccio, in central Italy, in an attempt to place the emphasis of Christmas upon the worship of Christ, rather than upon secular materialism and gift giving. Staged in a cave near Greccio, St Francis's nativity scene was a living one with humans and animals cast in the Biblical roles. The nativity scene created by Francis is described by St Bonaventure in his *Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, written around 1260.

St Bonaventure described the nativity scene as follows: "To excite the villagers to commemorate the nativity of the Infant Jesus with devotion, Francis prepared a manger, and brought hay, and an ox and an ass to the place appointed. The brethren were summoned, the people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that holy night was made glorious by many bright lights and psalms of praise. The man of God stood before the manger full of devotion, bathed in tears and radiant with joy and chanted the holy gospel. Then he preached to the people of the nativity

¹ A nativity scene is also known as a manger scene, crib, *crèche*, or in Italian *presepio* or *presepe*.

of the poor King; and because he could not utter his name for the tenderness of his love, he called him the Babe of Bethlehem. A soldier said that he saw an Infant marvellously beautiful, sleeping in the manger, whom Francis embraced with both his arms as if he would awake him from sleep.’

For St Francis the crib is iconic, an image in a physical space that embraces the eternal; it draws us into its own life and leads us into a realm beyond, a kind of sacrament of the Incarnation where, as we meditate on it, we glimpse the ineffable mystery of God made man. We only glimpse it, for its infinite depths are beyond our grasp. Francis intended that the crib should lead people into a new and deeper awareness of how wonderful it is that the divine should enter this world and share our life as Immanuel, God with us.

In Germany and in some parts of France near the German border, during Advent every city and town has its Christmas fair, where one can drink mulled wine and enjoy sweetmeats and buy exquisite gifts and decorations. At the heart of the buying and selling, one comes to a life-sized crib, lovingly adorned for the festival. They call it *Christkindlmarkt*, the Christ-child market. It is as if the Holy Child himself has come to bless this festive time, to be present at our merrymaking and to call us back to the true source of our happiness and joy.

What do you think that we would have heard in the stable if we could have been there at that first Christmas, more than two thousand years ago? I invite you to think a moment with me about the different people who were present at the scene (or who could have been) and how they might have responded to the question that our Lord one day asked of his disciples: ‘But who do *you* say that I am?’²

² Cf. Mt 16. 15.

Firstly, our Lady, the Mother of God. Mary, who do you say that I am? Blessed Mother, more than anyone else you understand the true mystery of Christmas. With a mother's love, you gaze upon your baby son, but you look deeper. Mary, you see beyond the outward veil of flesh; you see not only an infant, but also the eternal Son of God born eternally of the Father, who is now born in time through you.

Secondly, the people of Bethlehem. People of Bethlehem, who do you say that I am? What an inconvenience! An unwanted child. You could at least have seen a family in need; and yet in your inn there is no room? 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him'.³

Thirdly, the shepherds. Shepherds, who do you say that I am? You are simple men, and the Pharisees of Jerusalem think nothing of you because you do not share their sophisticated learning. But you are men of the promise: you know only that God promised your fathers a Redeemer, and you know that he is faithful. Now is the time for the promise 'made' to become the promise 'fulfilled'. The angel song is the reward for your humility, and you are the first ones invited to adore in the flesh the one whom even Moses feared to see in the thunders of Mount Sinai.

Fourthly, King Herod. King Herod, who do you say that I am? O saddest of sinners, the wilfully ignorant. The scribes of Jerusalem open to you the prophetic books, and the finger of the centuries points out the Messiah. Not only do you refuse to adore, but you think that you can destroy God's plan. We weep for you, poor Herod, when we see you at the head of the long line of dictators who think that they can build a human peace by refusing the Prince of Peace.

And finally, what about us? Dear friends, who do we say that Jesus is? Is he just a family tradition? Do we feel perhaps threatened (as Herod did), because we are

³ Cf Jn 1. 11.

somehow aware that if Christ is who he says he is, then we need to give him our whole life? Or are we indifferent (as the people of Bethlehem were); have we given our Lord the space he wants to have in *our inn*?

God sent his Son, in the form of a small, new-born baby, to save us. As the angel told the shepherds, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a *Saviour*, who is the Messiah, the Lord'. God sent his Son to save the world, because it needs saving. Because Jesus has come, salvation is now possible.

Let us come today to Christ in the stable on bended knee, with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds. Let us come *into* the stable, and wait for the shepherds to pay their humble homage; and let us see the stable anew as if it were for the first time. Today, heaven is all wrapped up in swaddling clothes. He is there, waiting; waiting for us. The world can never be the same once God enters it as one of us. It is our turn now to come to the manger.

Amen.