

# Christmas Dawn 2017

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At the Midnight Mass we hear the story of how Jesus came to be born at Bethlehem. At this Mass we hear the response to this wonderful event – first that of the shepherds and then that of Our Lady.

What did the shepherds find when they made their way into Bethlehem? St Francis of Assisi tried to capture the image for the people of Greccio in Italy in 1223, as we did last Sunday, by organising a live 'Nativity' scene. He told the man who had given the property to him, "I wish in full reality to awaken the remembrance of the child as he was born in Bethlehem and of all the hardship he had to endure in his childhood. I wish to see with my bodily eyes what it meant to lie in a manger and sleep on hay, between an ox and an ass." St Luke does not mention the ox and ass but that does not mean they are just pious imagination. Isaiah foresees the scene: "The ox knows its owner and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know; my people does not understand." The crib has in some mysterious way revealed the mystery of God with us to the ox and ass while townfolk of Bethlehem are oblivious to the wonder that has come to pass in their midst. Likewise Herod and the religious authorities did not recognise the coming of the Saviour before the arrival of the Wise Men alerted them. It was only the simple shepherds who were granted the grace of recognition. This was the lesson that St Francis wanted the villagers of Greccio to absorb!

The shepherds came and explained what had happened to them. It was just as they had been told and they went back glorifying God. They had a simple faith that God would keep his promises and hearts open to believe the message of the angel. We should not think they were stupid or naïve. They were uneducated shepherds but while they have their sheep to look after and worry about shepherds also have plenty of time to think, especially during the long nights of keeping watch. Although the Scriptures do not tell us the date on which Jesus was born it was linked to the birth of John the Baptist and while it is only in C4 that the Feast of Christmas comes to be generally celebrated as early as 204 AD the writer Hippolytus suggests that the birth of Christ took place on 25<sup>th</sup> December. It is not only midwinter but also the time of the Jewish feast of Hannukah, the Feast of Lights, when they celebrate the restoration of the Temple after its desecration by King Antiochus, and the regained independence of Israel under the descendants of the Maccabees – a promise that had somehow evaporated. The shepherds were well aware that Herod might be a king but he was not descended from David and could not be the Messiah. Here was a potential king they could identify with – one of their own!

Mary and Joseph recognise not only that they have a new baby but that God has fulfilled his promise. "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart". We are not told of Joseph's feelings but when his heart was troubled by scepticism at the news of Mary's pregnancy he had accepted the angel's message, he accompanied Mary on the journey to Bethlehem and would take them to safety in Egypt when Herod sent his soldiers.

In Nativity plays or Christmas carols children often wonder what gifts they should bring to Jesus. What can we give him? The true gift that human beings give to Jesus is his Blessed Mother! She embodies our love and dedication. She gives him her whole life. She invites us to do the same. It is good that we celebrate Christmas by giving each other gifts but we must not forget the one whose birthday we are keeping. Let us offer him our hearts and our loving service, whatever the calls he may make upon us, even if only in the form of the prayer, "I believe, Lord, help my unbelief"! May we express that love in a concrete way to all those who suffer, are in need or lonely this Christmas time.