

Onlookers or Disciples? Visitors to the Manger

This Home Retreat considers how as Christians we should welcome the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

During Advent, we have been preparing to celebrate the birth of Christ, the moment when God took human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem to Mary, who had conceived him through the action of the Holy Spirit, and to Joseph his foster father. As we read in the Prologue to St John's Gospel, 'The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.' (St John 1:14).

Begotten in silence by the Father before all creation, the Word of God through whom all that exists was made and by whose death and resurrection we are saved, became human just as we are and, though without sin, entered into the depths of our human condition, experiencing in quality, if not necessarily in kind, all that it is to be human. This is our faith, and most remarkable it is. We believe – we might say, we know to be true – God is both our Creator and Redeemer, giving us out of love all that we have and are. As Jesus taught:

God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved. (St John 3: 16-17).

Believing this and knowing it to be true, the question for us as Christian believers becomes, 'What difference does this really make to my life?' How or in what ways do I live differently than I might otherwise live because I believe in Jesus, the Son of God? As tomorrow evening, in imitation of the shepherds and the Magi, we come to the manger, what will this encounter with the newborn Saviour really mean for us?

We know well the Gospel that will be read at the Mass During the Night on Christmas Eve, this being St Luke's account of how Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger because there was no room at the inn. St Luke then records, how:

In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. They were terrified, but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.... Now 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.' So they hurried away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw the child, they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds had to say. As for Mary, she treasured these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; it was exactly as they had been told. (St Luke 2:8-11, 15-20)

In this passage, St Luke records for us an encounter with the Divine – with God-made-man in Jesus. The shepherds took the angels at their word and went into Bethlehem, to the manger, to 'see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us', and Mary treasured and pondered in her heart all that had happened. They were aware of the significance of the encounter, the momentousness of the event, and responded in faith, the shepherds glorifying and praising God, and Mary allowing the mystery to dwell with her as she sought to grow in understanding of all that this meant. The shepherds could have come merely as onlookers – just to see what had happened – but they allowed the events, including their encounter with Jesus, to issue in praise of God because they had

accepted the truth of the angels' message, namely that 'a saviour has been born to you'; and Mary, already committed to welcoming Jesus by her assent given at the Annunciation, sought a deepening of her faith, astounded we might reasonably think, by the events surrounding the birth of her child. Truly we can say that both those at the manger and those who came there were not merely onlookers, but rather that this encounter was a key moment in their discipleship of the Lord.

Similarly the Magi, having followed the star to the place of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, did not remain casual or passive observers of what they found. As St Matthew records:

The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. (St Matthew 2: 10-11)

As with the shepherds, their encounter with the infant Lord had a dramatic and personal impact upon them, calling forth, inspiring, an action of faith, namely their falling to their knees and worshipping him, their gifts symbolising him whom they had encountered: a king and a priest, whose death and resurrection would bring salvation to the world.

So, once again, the question becomes, what does our remembrance and celebration of these events of just over two thousand years ago mean for us now in our own lives. How will this become a key moment in our discipleship? St Luke's account of Jesus' Presentation in the Temple can perhaps help us.

When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple 'to do for him what the Law required' (St Luke 2:27), he was recognised by two devout believers as 'the Christ of the Lord' (St Luke 2:26). The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before actually seeing the promised Messiah; and encountering Jesus, he praised God proclaiming, in the short canticle that we now call the Nunc Dimittis, 'my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all nations to see';

whilst Anna, ‘who never left the Temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayer... began to praise God and... spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem,’ (St Luke 2: 37-38)

Like Simeon and Anna, we come to Jesus recognising who he is, our Lord and Saviour. We welcome him and we ask earnestly in sincere prayer that he will complete the good work that he has already begun in us, that we will grow in faith, hope and love, truly becoming the people we have been created to be, Simeon’s words to Mary begin to indicate how this can come about:

You see this child: he is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected... so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare.

As already mentioned, we read in St John’s Gospel that God loved the world so much that He sent His only Son, not to condemn the world, but to free us from sin and to bring us to Himself, to share His life as the perfect and only true fulfilment of our own life. And for us, this involves change - a conversion of life, in fact, as we grow both humanly and spiritually, learning gradually to leave behind those things that prevent us from coming to God, a change that involves a stripping away of the sin that clings so easily to us, as we learn what it means to become true disciples of Jesus, his priorities becoming our priorities, his life becoming our life.

Inevitably, then, the conversion to which we are called - and forms an integral and constant part of our Christian discipleship - involves discomfort, at times even intense suffering, as we recognise and come to terms with just how much we are in need of the salvation which Jesus brings; and it is in this sense that we can understand how he becomes a ‘sign of contradiction’ for each one of us personally, as in our frailty and sinfulness we are confronted by all that is good and true.

But we know, too, the Lord's promise that he is with us always, even to the end of time; and the Letter to the Hebrews assures us that whatever our experience - however difficult it may be, and however caused by the various circumstances of our life - Jesus, who is with us, knows this experience himself, and in his suffering has redeemed our suffering. He who had been made perfect through obedient suffering in acceptance of the Father's will has become for us the source of eternal salvation, his prayers offered whilst on earth now being continually offered in heaven for our salvation.

Though sinless, Our Lady shares our experience of what it is to be human and knew suffering, just as Simeon had prophesied to her: 'and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' Standing at the foot of the Cross, she shared in Christ's redemptive suffering, united with him in the deepest sorrow and affliction, praying for the salvation of sinners, and foreshadowing St Paul's teaching to the Colossians that by sharing in Christ's suffering we participate in his saving work for the redemption of all, as we allow ourselves to be conformed to him, all that is unnecessary for this being stripped away as we are absorbed into his high priestly prayer that we may all be one in God.

Our Lady knew sorrow, but she also knew joy and found peace in the Lord. Let us ask her intercession for ourselves as we journey towards God, for our families and communities, and for all God's People, that we come to know the one true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent; that we be no mere onlookers but true disciples.

Suggested Reflection

The following short biblical quotations can be used to reflect upon the call to life with Christ and how best to respond. In reflecting on these, the following questions might be helpful:

- In what ways have I heard the call to life with Christ?
- How have I been able to respond positively to this call?
- What are the things that prevent me responding wholeheartedly?
- What are my true desires?

I have come so they may have life and have it to the full. (St John 10:10)

For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation. (2 Cor 5:17)

Life to me, of course, is Christ, but then death would bring me something more. (Philippians 1:21)

I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake. (Galatians 2:20)

The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:2)

I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world. (St John 6:51)