

## A CHRISTMAS EVE REFLECTION

### “Christmas in the Light of Easter”

(Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-16)

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Tonight, Christmas eve, we listen to St. Luke’s wonderful account of Jesus’ birth. Luke puts into his version of this time-honoured story very significant details that make it a catechesis leading us to a more mature faith. St. Luke meditates on the events of Christ’s birth in the light of his whole life, death and resurrection and the sending of his Spirit at Pentecost, the birthday of the Church.

St. Luke already perceives in this child whose birth he writes about, the Messiah, Son of God and Risen Lord. For him, we cannot really separate Christmas from Easter. In the end, he invites us to celebrate Christmas in the light of Easter.

For St. Luke, the story of the Lord’s birth is the entire Gospel in miniature. Parallels and connections between the beginning and the end of Jesus’ life show that the seed of his mission as Saviour was already within him at the time of his birth. The faith of the early Church in Christ can teach us much about the Historical Jesus. Let us explore the story and learn from Luke, master story teller and evangelist.

*“Now it happened that at this time Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be made of the whole inhabited world.”*

St. Luke is the only one to mention a census of *“the whole inhabited world.”* In so doing he underscores the universal and cosmic character of Jesus’ birth, a birth so humble it was barely noticed at the time. He who was *“in the form of God .... emptied himself;”* his birth took place during the reign of someone who considered himself God, an emperor who called himself *“Augustus.”*

That universal character of his mission is repeated in the great mandate at the end of the gospel: *“Go to all nations and make them disciples”* It is also reflected in the Pentecost event when people from around the known world, as far as *Egypt, Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs*, all heard the disciples upon whom the Spirit fell, speaking about God’s deeds of power in their own languages.

*“So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee for Judaea, to David’s town called Bethlehem ... with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.”*

At the very beginning of Luke’s gospel, Jesus “*ascended*” while still in his mother’s womb from Nazareth in Galilee, the crossroads of nations, to Bethlehem in Judea, the heart of the land given by God to the chosen People. The rest of his public life is the story of his *ascent* from Galilee, where Jesus began his ministry, to Judea, the capital of which is Jerusalem, where he goes to die. And finally, after his resurrection and appearances to his disciples, Jesus would *ascend* into heaven from where he would send us his own Spirit at Pentecost.

When Joseph leaves Nazareth with Mary to go to Bethlehem, it is to obey the orders of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus. Later, when Jesus leaves Galilee to begin his public life, he “*resolutely turned his face toward Jerusalem,*” in obedience to the will of his Father in Heaven.

Jesus is born in the birthplace of King David, called “*Bethlehem,*” which means “*House of bread.*” This fact is symbolic, inferring that the Son of God has come to give himself as nourishment. Later he would use the image of bread to refer to himself as the *Bread of Life*.

*“And she gave birth to her first-born son.”*

The title of First-born does not mean that Jesus is the first of many children; but it confers upon him the rights and duties of this position and shows that Jesus is the child of the promise. Mary’s first-born will later be the *first-born from the dead*. That is not the same as his friend Lazarus, who was raised back to life and had to die again. No, Jesus as *firstborn* is the first to be resurrected from the dead to new life, to eternal life, the very life of heaven. As such Jesus is the first to complete the full itinerary of the destiny of God’s children.

*“And wrapped him in bands of cloth.”*

The child is “*swaddled,*” according to the custom of wrapping newborn babies very tightly in bands of cloth in the hope of firming up their limbs. This swaddling not only connotes a mother’s maternal caring, but has a much deeper meaning about the death of Jesus. Indeed, as soon as he was

arrested at the Mount of Olives, Jesus was bound by ropes and chains. After his death he was wrapped in burial cloth. The swaddling at his birth alludes to what awaited him at his Passion and Death. In both cases he was weak and powerless, *“like a lamb led to the slaughterhouse, never opening his mouth.”* Yet we know and believe that in that powerlessness was the greatest of all power – the power to love and forgive unconditionally.

*“And she laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”*

In addition, Jesus was laid in a manger, as he will be in the tomb. Later on, Christian iconographers will draw attention to this similarity by giving the manger the appearance of a tomb and a burial place. Jesus takes on our human condition from the *“manger”* to the *“tomb carved in stone.”*

If Jesus was laid in a manger, it is again to prefigure the fact that, from the very first, he was meant to be nourishment, the bread from Heaven offered up so that all humankind would have life in abundance. Indeed, on the eve of his Passion, Jesus solemnly declared: *“Take and eat, this is my body.”* When we receive the Eucharistic bread, we need to be aware that we hold in our hands both the Christmas baby Jesus and the Risen Lord of Easter – all at the same time.

*“There were shepherds living in the fields... and an angel of the Lord stood before them .... And they were terrified. But the angel said, ‘Do not be afraid, for I bring you news of great joy.’”*

This scene at Jesus’ birth directly echoes Easter morning when the angel of the Lord, resplendent as lightning, came and rolled away the rock and said to the women: *“Be not afraid .... Jesus is not here ... he is risen,”* and they were filled with joy. The Good News of the birth of Jesus announced to the shepherds parallels the Good News of the Resurrection announced to the holy women.

The shepherds, symbols of vigilance, humility and poverty, receive the *sign* that reveals to us the new presence of God on earth: *You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in a manger.* They believe for in their simplicity and poverty, they are neither too busy nor too preoccupied to be open to this radical newness from God.

May we take our cue from Mary, Joseph and the shepherds. May our devotion to the Child in the Manger go beyond mere emotion and sentimentality! May our devotion lead us to discover in Jesus, through the eyes of faith and contemplative meditation, the Word who was sent by the Father to take upon himself our human condition. May it help us believe that by his death and resurrection, he saved us, liberated us and heals us. It was by making himself poor for our sake that the Lord was able to enrich us with his infinite riches. What an incredible exchange – our humble faith leads to the experience of God’s own life and Spirit.

May our celebration of Christmas truly be for us the prelude to the great Easter celebration and the fullness of eternal life. May our celebration tonight help us to understand, and live, the great mystery of Christmas in the light of Easter. Let us celebrate this Christmas in the powerful, brilliant light of Easter.

(This homily was inspired by a Christmas message entitled “*A Babe In Swaddling Clothes*” from Archbishop Emilius Goulet of St. Boniface, MB)