

## **The Nativity of the Lord, 2023**

Prior to the 6.30pm Mass last night we had our annual nativity play, in which many children took part and played the roles of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the angels. It was a beautiful rendition of the birth of Christ, and a big thank you is owed to all those who helped make it happen, including the children, their families, our musicians, as well as Carol Moore and her team of organisers.

Nativity plays are a lovely and charming tradition, which help bring alive the story of Jesus' birth and make it real for all those who watch it. We've been doing one for several years here at St Francis Xavier Parish, but of course they're hardly unique to us. Nativity plays are held in churches, schools, and town centres throughout the world, and have been for centuries. In fact, the very first nativity play took place exactly 800 years ago in a small Italian town called Greccio, and it was organised by none other than St Francis of Assisi.

Greccio is about 70kms south of Assisi, and St Francis had come at the request of the local Lord to preach to the townsfolk. Francis liked the area so much he decided to settle there for much of the later part of his life. He built a Sanctuary outside the town as a residence and place of meditation and worship, carving it into the rockface of the mountains halfway up a cliff.

At one point during this time, St Francis visited Bethlehem—the place of Jesus' birth—during a spiritual pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He was profoundly moved by this pilgrimage, and upon his return to Greccio he had a strong desire to share the graces of his visit with others who were unable to go themselves. So on Christmas Eve 1223—800 years ago tonight—Francis decided to recreate the scene of Jesus' birth prior to the midnight Mass.

He gathered hay, an ox, a donkey, and built a crude manger. Word had gone out to the townsfolk, and, at the appointed time, they arrived carrying torches and candles. Villagers joined in to play the roles of Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, and all those present were incredibly moved by the scene.

Francis had hoped to both educate and inspire the townsfolk about the celebration of Christmas. Keep in mind that most people in this era were illiterate, and were thus dependent upon both oral and visible representations for their knowledge of the events of salvation history. And the Greccio nativity scene not only served as a visible representation of the historical event of Christ's birth, it helped the villagers see themselves as part of the story. It was not only about something that happened all those years ago in Bethlehem, but it was also something that was happening to *them*, then and there.

As the nativity play unfolded, one of the friars began celebrating Mass, and Francis—who was a deacon—gave the homily. He noted how this simple celebration recalled

the hardships Jesus suffered even as an infant, and how our Saviour chose to become poor and weak for our sake.

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In Bethlehem, which St Francis had recently seen for himself, a large church had been built over the place where it is believed that the manger lay. There was initially a regular-sized entrance way to the church, but in part to prevent people from entering the church on horseback, the main entrance was eventually walled up and transformed into a small door. This small entry-way became known as the “Door of Humility”, since visitors are forced to bend down to go through it (the entrance is only 120cm tall and 60cm wide). This humble door, and the humility required to enter through it, soon became seen as a most appropriate symbol of the Incarnation.

Nine months ago, we celebrated the feast of the Annunciation, recalling how the Archangel Gabriel told Mary that she would give birth to the Saviour, and at which point the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity took on human form in her virgin womb. And today, nine months later, we celebrate his Nativity, marvelling in how Christ, our Lord and Saviour, was born as defenceless little baby.

These events reveal something most unexpected and surprising about God – namely, his profound *humility*. God could have easily come down to earth in all his glorious, other-worldly splendour, and scared us into submission. But instead, he lowered himself to become one of us, a humble human being (“humble” and “human” both coming from the root word meaning “of the earth”). And as a human, he didn’t come among us as a conquering hero on horseback, but instead he chose to come as a little baby, helpless and in need of human assistance, just as each of us were when we were newborn babies.

God doesn’t want us cowering in submission, but rather, he wants to us to accept his invitation to enter into of relationship of love. And love can’t be forced—I can’t put a gun to your head and say “you *must* love me”, because that wouldn’t be love, it would be fear. So God has to invite us, to woo us, to make us want to love him. And so he came among us as a little baby, in part (I suspect) because we don’t fear babies, but rather we instinctively love them.

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The beauty and wonder of this powerful mystery of God’s humble presence among us left a profound impact on the townsfolk of Greccio during that Christmas Eve celebration 800 years ago. It was such a success that the nativity play became a yearly tradition that was then spread around the world by missionaries and pilgrims who had witnessed it. And now, 800 years later, even in little ol’ Armadale on the other side of the world, this beautiful tradition lives on.

As I've noted, St Francis saw Christ's birth at Christmas as being inseparably linked to his Passion, because to become a human being inevitably means suffering and death. Already in his Incarnation, there is a profound letting go on Jesus' part that will mirror the ultimate letting go upon the cross. As St Paul says in his Letter to the Philippians:

His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. (Phil 2:6-8)

Jesus embraced the path of humility, poverty, and self-denial that led him from the manger of Bethlehem to the cross of Calvary. And as his followers, we are invited to follow this path ourselves.

In our world in which so many put themselves first—often through brute force—the followers of Christ are called to put others first. In our world that so often idealises power, and wealth, and the immediate satisfaction of every desire, we Christians are called to embrace humility, poverty, and self-denial. In our world that is so often overflowing with cynicism and sarcasm, we Christians are called to a path of child-like faith and wonder in the mystery of God.

Because, for all its arrogant bluster, our world is weary, and it secretly longs for something good and true and beautiful in which to place its hope. In the mystery of Christ's birth, as the carol proclaims, a weary world rejoices, and it longs to do so again.

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A quick glance at the news, in all its heaviness, reminds of our need for a saviour, to set us free from the misery of sin and death.

But during this season of Christmas in particular, I hope you'll find some time to turn off the news for a while, to rejoice in the good news that Jesus Christ came into the world to live, die, and conquer death, out of love for each one of us.

His life was to be poured out for us. The wood of the crib prefigures the wood of the cross. This is why he came into the world – to win for us a peace that the world cannot give, and the world cannot take away. As the prophet Isaiah said, 800 years before Christ:

There is a child born for us,  
a son given to us  
and dominion is laid on his shoulders;  
and this is the name they give him:  
Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God,

Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace.  
Wide is his dominion  
in a peace that has no end.  
(Isaiah 9:5-6a)

Jesus Christ is the Prince-of-Peace, the Mighty-God, the Wonder-Counsellor. His Church is the sacrament of our salvation, it prepares us for the wide and eternal dominion of peace to which the Lord will lead us.

A quick glance at the world around us—and a quick glance at our own hearts—reminds us that sin is real, and that none of us escapes the disordering and corrupting influence of Satan.

But this Christmas, remember too that grace is real; that Christ can make of us saints; that we can share eternity in the blessed life of the Holy Trinity. This is the story that matters more than any other. It's the one I most want to tell. You and I serve the Prince of Peace, who came among us as a little baby, so as to call us into his Kingdom of grace.

The Lord is king, let the earth rejoice. May we proclaim his justice. And may we see his glory.

Merry Christmas!