

The Nativity of the Lord

Tonight is a special night. All people who have once been touched by the Christian message—no matter how secular they may have become—still retain an appreciation for the specialness of this night. Against all odds, and amidst all the busyness, the stress, and the commercialism, this night still maintains a power to capture our imagination and fill us with wonder.

The charm of this night lies in its humility. Almighty God—the creator and sustainer of the entire universe—chose to humble himself and become one of us, for the sake of our salvation. And he chose to come in a way that no-one would have expected.

If I were Jesus—thank goodness I'm not—and I decided to come down to earth, I probably would have chosen some flashy way of getting people's attention. However, our Lord chose a far different way.

He did not choose to come via important family connections – but instead chose a lowly woman betrothed to a carpenter. He did not choose to come to an important city – but instead chose a small, insignificant village in a far-off corner of the empire. And he did not choose to come as a conquering hero – but instead chose to come as a new-born baby. Defenceless... vulnerable... humble... these are not words we would normally associate with God, yet there he lays in the manger as a weak little baby. It is no surprise that this event marks the beginning of what we now call the New Testament, for God is indeed doing something utterly new in the world.

But why? What does God have to gain by entering the world in such a lowly and humble way? The medieval theologian William of Saint Thierry once said that, from the very beginning of creation, God had seen that his grandeur—his sheer awesomeness—provoked resistance in mankind – that next to him we felt limited in our own being, and threatened in our freedom. And so God chose a new way – he became a child. He made himself dependent and weak, in need of our love. And this God who has become a child says to us: now you can no longer fear me, you can only love me.

Small babies have a remarkable way of breaking down our defences. We've all had the experience of being on a bus or a train, with all the people on board generally trying to avoid looking at each other. And then a young mother comes on board with a small baby, and the dynamic suddenly shifts. Nearby people find themselves drawn to the baby, and feel no hesitation in looking at it and talking sweet nothings to it.

To make eye-contact with another person is to make yourself somewhat vulnerable – but with a baby we don't hesitate, because they're already vulnerable. We can't fear a baby – we can only love it. And the baby not only invites us in, but it can also open up a line of communication with the parents and other people nearby as well.

If God came to earth in all his glory we would probably all run for cover, and cower in the corner, as we perhaps should in the presence of the Almighty. But God chose to come as a helpless, defenceless baby – and in so doing he breaks down our defences, and draws us in to love him. It's beautiful. It's perfect.

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But herein also lies a trap for us Christians. For, in our desire to share the beauty of this feast with others, and in our understandable reluctance to offend non-believers, we can sometimes over-domesticate the Christmas message, and acquiesce to those who would see it as nothing more than a sentimental season of generosity, family and good will. Don't get me wrong – these are certainly fine things, and we can all do with such sentiments at the end of long year. But for us believers, the implications of this night are nothing short of *revolutionary*.

The real significance of what we celebrate tonight can be lost on people who don't realise the reality of the human condition; people who don't realise just how dreary and depressing a life without God's grace actually is; people who don't realise just how important and mind-blowing the person of Jesus was and is *for all of humanity*.

Jesus was not just a wise teacher who told nice stories about being nice. I mean, if that's all he was, there's no reason why he would have been killed. No, he was perceived to be a *serious threat* to life as they knew it – and so he was!

Even at his birth, Jesus' presence turned things upside-down, and was therefore deeply unsettling to the status quo. In Saint Matthew's account, the wise men speak of the newborn child as the infant king of the Jews, a fact which deeply troubles the Jewish king Herod and the city of Jerusalem along with him. Herod would be so threatened by the presence of a rival king that he ultimately orders the slaughter of all male children born in the last two years. So much for a season of warmth and good cheer!

The Jews had hoped that the long-awaited Messiah would kick out the hated Roman occupiers, and re-establish a proud Jewish kingdom like that of King David. And some of Jesus' followers became frustrated when it became clear that this is not what he had in mind. In a sense, their problem was that they aimed too small. They wanted freedom from their occupiers. Jesus intended to offer them freedom from sin. They wanted to defeat the Romans. Jesus intended to defeat death.

The One whose birth we celebrate tonight has come with a refining fire to distinguish true joy from shallow imitations. He speaks God's Word to cleanse the soul and mind from the false clichés that influence us. He speaks clarifying truth about how we should strive to live if we are to have Eternal Life. At its core, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a message of seasonal cheer but a cleansing, clarifying challenge to a deeper kind of life, which we can either accept or reject.

Nonetheless, despite its unsettling nature, the coming of Jesus is fundamentally Good News, precisely *because* it is so consequential. At the end of the day, Jesus is not just a great king, or yet-another guru – he is God himself.

So there's really no room to be neutral about Jesus. He's either who he claimed to be... or he's dangerous. Either he really is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, or he's a madman. If he's a madman, then there's no point in any of us being here. But if he really is God made man, he's not only someone whom we should listen to, he's someone whom we should devote *our whole lives to*.

The socially-palatable version of the Christmas story is ultimately not worth a whole lot—and it's certainly not worth giving one's life for—because it doesn't challenge us with the offer of remaking our lives anew. The *true* Christmas story is social and spiritual *dynamite*. Far from being a mere fairy-tale, it carries awesome implications of life and death for all of us. The coming of Christ is earth-shaking stuff, and its reverberations are still being felt across the globe.

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Our Lord and Saviour has come to us with great authority, and great love—and he beckons you and I to follow him. It will involve the cross – but we also know that through his Resurrection, Christ has overcome the power of sin and death, and opened for us the doorway to his heavenly kingdom.

And so, as we celebrate our Lord's birth 2,000 years ago, and await his return at the end of time, I encourage you to take some time this Christmas to personally invite him into your life in a new and deeper way. Give the Lord permission to *remake* you according to his will for you. Let this feast we celebrate really affect your life. Perhaps start with striving to be charitable to that annoying family member who you're not looking forward to seeing this Christmas.

All it takes is one moment for God to touch our lives in a miraculous way. So do not be afraid. This was the angels' message to Mary, to Joseph, and to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid!"

The Christmas message is that good is stronger than evil; light is stronger than darkness.

This night the angels rejoice;
A new day has dawned;
The darkness has forever lost its stronghold;
The light of the nations is born:
The Prince of Peace,
The Saviour of the world.

My prayer for all of you—and your families—is that the peace of Christ may dwell with you all, this Christmas and always. Amen.