

On the screens there is a picture of the holy family: Mary, Joseph, and the newborn baby Jesus asleep on the hay. It's a cute little caricature.

Have you ever seen works of art portraying the manger scene from other countries and other cultures? I have to admit that it used to concern me when I'd see nativity scenes from other countries that depicted Jesus as being of the same race as the majority of people in that country—in a Chinese painting Jesus looked Asian, in an African portrayal Jesus had dark skin, or, for that matter, in a German or Scandinavian portrait Jesus looked like a blue-eyed European.

It bothered me a little because the Christmas narrative is a **true** story. It's **real** history, and Jesus is a **Middle Eastern Jew**. To depict the nativity in some other way seemed to me to be making it a kind of a fairy tale that we can mold, shape, and change to fit our wishes and needs. The account of Jesus' birth though, is **no** myth. It doesn't belong in the same category as all the fantasy that has become so much a part of our culture's secular Christmas holiday.

What we heard today from Luke's Gospel is real. The Gospel writer emphasizes that point by even giving you some of the historical details about who the Caesar was, about the census he ordered, and even who the governor of that region was at that time: Quirinius. A name that, over the years, has tripped up many a child trying to recite this line in a Children's Christmas service! Make no mistake, though, the Christmas story is an **actual, literal** account about the real Jesus and His birth.

I talked about how this **used** to concern me, but over time, the more I gave it some thought, the more I became convinced that those paintings have got it exactly right, at least in this sense: The angel came with the message of good news for **all** people. "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for **all** the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10-11). The Savior Jesus is born to you, **for** you; He is **yours**. He's your kind, **humankind**. In His coming in human flesh, Jesus embraces **all** of humanity.

Yes, when the Son of God took on our human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary, He didn't just become **a** man. He became **man**. He took all of humanity into Himself in His when He became flesh. He came in order to bear the sins of all humanity in His body. That includes **every** nation and race and people and language. Even though Jesus was indeed a Jew, His birth reveals the truth that there is in fact only **one** human race, the fallen children of Adam and Eve.

And in this newborn baby in the manger, every sinner is redeemed and restored to God. Jesus is the embodiment of all people from **every** corner of the globe, and in His body **all** people are put right with God again. And so, when Jesus is portrayed as African or Asian or European, theologically speaking that's quite **true**. By becoming man, Christ becomes **one** with all people to **deliver** all people. The Savior is born **to you and for you**. He's one of us, our very flesh and blood, our true human brother. Nobody is left out of the new life that comes from His holy birth. He's like you and me in every way, except without sin, so that you might become like Him in every way and share in His divine glory.

This alone is the basis for the peace on earth of which the angels sang. In Jesus, God and sinners are reconciled. We're no longer under God's wrath; we're at peace with Him again through His self-giving mercy. The case of God against the human race is set aside, and His love for the world is revealed. Our flesh has been joined to God. Heaven and earth are at peace. God and man are brought back together in Jesus. That's because Jesus is God and man together in one person. Baptized into Christ, we are put **right** with God. And living in Christ, we are put right with one another too. The only peace on this earth that lasts is the peace of **Christ**. Because of Him we are forgiven sinners united as one in His body, the Church.

Of course, that first Christmas night was probably **not** very peaceful for Joseph and Mary. Not only did they have to deal with the stress and anxiety of traveling to Bethlehem for the census, but they also had to try and find a place to stay while Mary was in labor. And there wasn't **any** place for them, except with the animals.

Imagine a first-time mother trying to give birth under **those** conditions! The fact that Jesus was born in these circumstances points to how things would play out in His whole ministry. John chapter 1 says that "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (Jn 1:11). People didn't understand or grasp who Jesus truly was. He was an outcast and an outsider. And yet John goes on, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (1:12-13).

I think we'd all like to think that if **we** were there that night in Bethlehem, **we** would've made room for this family. But the truth is that often times our lives say otherwise. By our sins, **we too**, have shut Jesus out. It's not only those who those who don't come to church very often who push Jesus away, who don't have any room for Him in their inn. No, it's also sometimes those of us

who **are** here regularly. We at times keep Jesus closed in to the church and we don't have room for Him out there in our day-to-day lives. We shut out the Word of Christ in certain situations where it's not convenient for us. We shut out the people in whom Christ is present for us to love. We don't want to have to deal with the inconvenience of letting Jesus in because of all the changes that might mean for us in the way we live.

Whatever the case may be, whoever we are, whatever we have done or not done, the message of Christmas is this: Christ came for you and me to **rescue** us, to **forgive** us. **He** has made room for you and me by His gracious mercy. He was willing to deal with the indignity of His birth, His humble life, and His humiliating death in order that we might be dignified and exalted and lifted up with Him in His resurrection to everlasting life.

The truth is the real story of Christmas from Luke chapter 2 foreshadows the reason **why** Jesus came into this world. Even as He was born outside the inn with the animals, so He would be crucified outside the city with common beastly criminals. Even as He was wrapped in strips of linen and laid in a manger, so later He would be wrapped in cloths and laid in a tomb. Even as the **shepherds** came to worship him, so it is that Jesus is the **Lamb** of God who takes away the sins of the world. The wood of the manger would later be traded for the wood of the cross. We must never forget that our Lord took on flesh and blood so that He might sacrifice His flesh and shed His blood to cleanse us and make us holy; to make us His own special people. He was born to die for us so that we might be reborn to **live** in Him forever!

The place of Jesus' birth was Bethlehem, which means literally, "house of bread." Even as He was laid in a feeding trough, so Jesus is given to be holy food for us, the bread of life, of which a person may eat and live forever. So, let's come today to the bread and wine that holds and is His true body and blood given for the forgiveness of our sins. We get to receive the living bread from heaven, that our humanity may be restored in Him who became fully human for us. You don't have to go to the Holy Land to feel close to Jesus. In a real sense, the communion rail is the holy land, where Christ is truly present for you. We get to kneel with the shepherds right here at this altar.

To everyone, whoever we are, wherever we come from, whatever we've done, know this and take this to heart: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. In Him, you are forgiven, you are put right with God. All is well! "For unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:11). Merry Christmas! Amen.