

## Reflection for December 24, 2020

### **'That Baby is God'!**

*We sing of Jesus,*

*a Jew,*

*born to a woman in poverty*

*in a time of social upheaval*

*and political oppression.*

*He knew human joy and sorrow.*

*So filled with the Holy Spirit was he*

*that in him people experienced the presence of*

*God among them.*

*We sing praise to God incarnate.*

*How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!*

*So God imparts to human hearts the blessed gift of heaven.*

*Do not be afraid; for see-I am bringing good news...*

Let us pray:

*O God, how grateful we are that you came to us in Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel. You understand our humanity, our fears, our weaknesses, our succumbing to sin, those moments when we are less than what you wish us to be. You understand our love, our hurts, and our pain. You understand our struggle with grief and death. Thank you for revealing yourself to us in Jesus, that we might know who you are and that we might walk with you and love you all of our days. Use us to be Emmanuel for those who don't know you. Help us to incarnate your love and grace to all that we meet. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

This is the night when all our preparations have been made—or abandoned, or put on hold, or suspended—and we are here to settle into a mystery. This is the night when even the cynics suspend disbelief, believing if only for this night that God is born among us and everything is possible. Edward Schillebeeckx, the distinguished Dutch theologian, recalled from his childhood the enormous creche his father had built for their home. Made of brown paper to imitate rocks with human figures, sheep and a whole caravanserai of camels, it was located in one corner of the living room. Upon seeing the ornamental baby Jesus for the first time, Fr. Schillebeeckx exclaimed, ‘That baby is God’! This is what we mean when we speak of the Incarnation of God: God took on flesh and entered our world as a human being. Jesus is not merely God wrapped in human flesh—God in a body. God *became human* in Jesus. God experienced what we experience as humans.

Professor Lynn Japinga writes: “A photo of the Holy Family taken several hours after the birth of Jesus would probably have shown an exhausted Mary, still sore from the birth, struggling to help the baby to latch on and begin to nurse. Other family members may have been in and out of the room, even as the new parents longed for sleep and privacy. Baby Jesus may have been more irritable and fussy than meek and mild. The birth of Jesus profoundly changed the world, but it was also profoundly ordinary. Jesus came into the world as we all do, from the body of a woman who had housed and nurtured him for nine months. Like all babies, he cried when he was hungry or irritable or wet or lonely, because that is how babies communicate. Like all babies, he was vulnerable and dependent and would survive only with the care of loving and patient parents.” This is in part what is so powerful about the idea of the Incarnation. God doesn’t just imagine what it’s like to be human; in Jesus, God *became* flesh. Jesus came to incarnate God’s presence and love to humanity.

He calls us to do the same in his name. We are intended to put flesh on the invisible God, to incarnate God for the world. Jesus is God with us. Because he is Emmanuel, Jesus knows and understands our humanity, including our temptations, struggles, pain, and afflictions. Because Jesus is Emmanuel—God-with-Us—he is able to show us who God is and what God is like. As Emmanuel, he seeks to remind us that he is *always* with us and we don't need to be afraid.

Why on earth should something which happened in a little town in Judea more than two thousand years ago be of any interest to us in our lives today? What is it about the birth story of a baby who wasn't famous, rich or obviously noteworthy that has made it so enduring? Pam Rhodes, the British novelist and television personality, responds to this question by sharing a deeply moving vignette: *"The power of that story was made clear to me in the most humbling way a couple of years ago when I was lucky enough to be one of the leaders on a pilgrimage trip around the Holy Land. It's a fascinating, and often very emotional, experience to visit those places whose names we've known all our lives from stories in the Bible. But, if you've ever been on such a trip, you'll know it can be completely exhausting too, as there are so many sites to see in a short space of time. You're forever climbing off and on the coach, tearing around one significant location after another at breakneck speed, and no pilgrim wants to miss out on any of them! There were about fifty of us travelling on our coach, and I soon became aware of an undercurrent of exasperation among some of the group about a delightful but quite elderly lady, Phyllis. She was cheerfully struggling to keep up with the rest of us but going at such a slow pace that some were grumbling she was holding up the whole party. It was clear, though, that she just couldn't walk any faster, not because she was disabled in any way, but for the simple reason that she was wearing the most inappropriate shoes—huge open-toed leather flip-flops that seemed to be several sizes too big for her. No wonder she had*

*to take time walking over the uneven surfaces in the ancient places we were visiting! Finally, the inevitable happened. While we were wandering around the town of Bethlehem she lost her footing and took a nasty tumble, though it left her shaken rather than hurt. For the rest of the afternoon, I kept her company as we meandered around, leaving the others in the group to make the rounds much more speedily without us to hold them back. As we walked, she told me her story. This pilgrimage was something she'd dreamed of doing for years, and when she finally booked it, she'd purchased a place not just for herself, but also for her son, because they really wanted to share the experience together. Tragically, soon after the tickets arrived, he developed a severe form of cancer, and by the time the trip came around, he was far too ill to travel. So she decided to take him with her by wearing his shoes, so that she could walk in the footsteps of Christ for him. What faith! What love! And what inspired such faith and love in her was the sense of fellowship she felt with another mother in Bethlehem from two thousand years earlier. That young mother also gave birth to a son she loved; taught and cared for him as he grew; felt pride in his achievements as a young man—and she too knew the pain that one day she would have to watch him die. But Mary would discover the truth that death does not have the final word; that though her son had died that was not the end of him. Mary would become a member of the community of faith in Jerusalem formed by the belief in the resurrection of Jesus. This thought brought great comfort to Phyllis. That's why his birth two thousand years ago still matters—and that's why people around the world continue to celebrate his coming each year with joy and thanks."*

“We (Christians) believe that with all its ambiguities, this is God’s world, because of Jesus Christ, who, as John’s Gospel tells us, is like a light shining in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. His life, his teaching, his death, his resurrection, above all, his unconquerable

love, are so overwhelmingly impressive that we confess that in him we have seen the glory of the Father, full of grace and truth. In him, something new entered the world, a life so compelling in its love and outreach to all that we accept him as the revelation of the deepest reality. It is in him that we learn what human life is about and what this world is about” (John Macquarrie).

The manger or feeding trough is not just a sign of Jesus’ humility. A feeding trough is where God’s creatures eat. This is a sign to us—it is a detail Luke includes to point toward something greater. He who called himself the bread of life, who alone can satisfy the deepest longings of our souls, was born in the town of Bethlehem—the “House of Bread”—and was laid to sleep on that first night in a trough where God’s creatures ate. What we really hunger for will not be found under the tree on Christmas morning. We hunger for meaning, for joy, for hope in the face of despair. We hunger for a love that will not let us go and for life and triumph in the face of death. These come through a baby born in a stable, laid to sleep in a feeding trough, visited by night-shift shepherds. He is for us the bread of life.

*Bill Cantelon*