

ADVENT ANTICIPATION

We look ahead to the birth of the Son of God, but already we are gazing at a manger scene in many places. Sometimes the figure of the baby is there, or more appropriately, since this is a season of anticipation, the crib is empty. From the earliest centuries of the Christian era, all the details of the Christmas event have captured the human imagination. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke provide information about the circumstances surrounding the Nativity and artists, poets, and composers are inspired to try to depict all that took place. Pilgrims making their way to Bethlehem helped the creche tradition take root when they returned to their homelands. During the middle ages traveling wagons, doubling as stages, depicted the opening chapter of Jesus' life as one part of a dramatic presentation of His whole history.

St. Francis of Assisi deserves credit for making the manger scene come alive and familiar. In 1223 at an evening religious gathering lit only by candles, he presented the drama of that first Christmas night. The poor man of Assisi enriched those present by a portrayal which captured the hearts of his first viewers. Since then, that intimate scene has spread far and wide all over the globe. From churches and chapels, it moved on into ordinary homes where a manger could be represented by pictures or by simple statuary.

We can all connect with a baby since each one of us had to begin life just that way. It is part of a natural process for us to come from our mother's womb weak and helpless. But why would God choose such an entrance into His universe? Who would leave eternity to submit himself to time and change? And more than that, who would establish Himself in a wounded race? Who would? God would. "It was our infirmities that He bore" (Is 53:4).

The Word of God Who expresses all that the Father is, becomes small and without power to speak. "Your power and your justice, O God, reach to Heaven. You have done great things. O God, who is like You?" (Ps 71:19). Now the omnipotent Second Person of the Trinity is completely dependent on a Jewish maiden and her husband. God has descended to our level. We can draw near without fear, for the Almighty is wrapped in swaddling clothes. "The lowly will ever find joy in the Lord and the poor rejoice in the Holy One of Israel" (Is 29:19).

Jesus is so much one of us that different sections of the world dare to show Him in their own special garb and with symbols from their traditions. Yes, Jesus was born a Jewish boy with Jewish features on His face. But we know He has come for all nations. At times a representation of the Christ child may reflect customs connected with birth in a particular culture. Nativity scenes use every kind of solid material. Crafters work in wood, brass, copper, glass—or perhaps with cloth, paper and plastics. Jesus may be given skin light or dark, his eyes any color. Thus Christ's Sacred Humanity joins Him to every descendant of Adam and Eve. No one is excluded.

In kneeling before a manger, we are not only celebrating Jesus' birth. We are celebrating each other. For every one of us He came, and it was to win our hearts that He entered this world just as we do. St. Augustine says, "The One Who holds the world in being was lying in a manger. He was at the same time speechless Infant and Word. He did not shrink from making His own our tiny beginnings." St. Augustine continues, " May He make us into children of God, since for our sake He was willing to be made a human child" (Sermon 184).

What we see as we kneel at the manger conveys a message to us. We are brothers and sisters of Jesus, finding in Him an ongoing lesson about what it means to be human. He touches all aspects of our earthly life. In one another we meet Jesus, Who asks us to open our eyes to recognize Him there. So nobody is a stranger, because we see everywhere the lineaments of a sacred face. Perhaps it's the appeal of a baby lifting little arms that delights us. In many different guises Christ appears.

Walk along the paths laid out by the requirements of your day. Slow down at times to prepare a deeper place of love for Jesus in your heart. Then look ahead to His Nativity while a quiet stream of Advent blessings adds joy to each succeeding hour.

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