

CHRISTMAS (GOSPEL FROM THE MASS AT MIDNIGHT)

We love this story about the first Christmas. For 2,000 years it has warmed us and inspired us and consoled us. We love the simplicity of the manger, the serenity of the shepherds, the drama of the angels making their announcement, and the beauty of God's plan of salvation unfolding in this very human scene.

But most of all, I think we love the *mystery* best. This story is full of biblical mystery. We're so accustomed to setting up our family Nativity set (or sets) year after year that we don't stop to consider what it is we're really looking at and that it presents more questions than it answers.

First of all, if we compare this version written by St. Luke to the other three Gospels, we get a surprise. St. Luke tells us about the shepherds, but doesn't mention the Magi. St. Matthew's version is the one that tells the story of the Magi, but does not mention the shepherds.

So our Nativity sets actually represent the combination of both of these accounts. And even more surprising, the other two Gospels, Mark and John, don't even mention the birth of Jesus at all. They both begin with Jesus as an adult. So why don't all four Gospels agree about the Nativity? It's a mystery.

Another mystery is the actual date. The Church is fairly sure Jesus was *not* born on December 25. The reason the Church can be so sure is because it is the Church itself that actually set the date of December 25 as Christmas. Remember that records were not kept very well in biblical times, and at the time of his birth Jesus was not recognized as *the* pivotal figure in salvation history. This only came about after his resurrection. So his birth information was probably lost.

But why did the Church pick December 25? Well, there was a popular pagan feast back then on that date that celebrated the *Sun*. The Church wanted to compete with this pagan celebration by establishing its own feast that worshipped the *Son*. The real date remains a mystery.

Now we look at the story itself. Caesar Augustus ordered a census, so each male had to enroll in his hometown. Joseph was a descendant of King David, so he had to go to Bethlehem, David's birthplace, to register. Now Scripture had predicted the Messiah's birth would take place in Bethlehem, so this decree of Caesar Augustus is what got Joseph and Mary to arrive in Bethlehem in time for Jesus' birth.

Caesar Augustus, a Roman emperor and a pagan and the most powerful man on earth at the time, by calling for this census unknowingly fulfilled God's plan and placed the right people in the right place at the right time. The way God works, even in our own lives, is often a mystery.

Most of our Nativity scenes show the Holy Family in a stable, although this is also a mystery, because Scripture never mentions a stable. St. Luke mentions a manger, which is actually a feeding trough for animals, which made the early Christians believe animals must have been around and therefore a stable or a barn was a likely location.

Some scholars have actually believed it was a cave—and we can see this belief clearly in the icons of the Eastern Church—which would have provided more protection. It also makes a powerful connection between Jesus' birth and his burial in a tomb cut out of rock. But the real setting of the birth of Jesus remains a mystery, although we are clearly told that there was no room for them in the inn.

Why doesn't God clear up all this mystery and tell us how it really happened? Wouldn't that make it easier for people to believe? Wouldn't Jesus have more followers? Wouldn't the Church now have more members, and wouldn't we all be a little more faithful to the Commandments and the message of the Gospels? Why does there have to be mystery?

Mystery is one of the things that gives this story so much flavor and color, and oddly enough it's the mystery that makes it more believable. The whole thing is much too farfetched to be anything but divinely guided, with the events unfolding gently and gracefully under God's care. And yet, in spite of being farfetched, the story somehow makes perfect sense because it appeals to our faith as much as to our emotions. It seems to satisfy both.

This is a message we desperately need today, because it tells us God is still with us. In spite of tyrannical emperors (which we still have in some parts of the world today), in spite of uncertainty about dates and other facts, in spite of conflicting stories by the evangelists, in spite of all these mysteries, the real truth of this story is that God was born in human form, and that same God is still with us. None of these things, or anything else, can overpower or outshine the God who has promised us salvation. That's what this story about the birth of Jesus really tells us.

I have a suggestion for your celebration of Christmas. Read the story of the Nativity from St. Luke's Gospel, then read the one from St. Matthew's Gospel. Read them both in front of your own Nativity set. Do this with your children. Children, if you're old enough you can do this for yourself. Move the figures around and follow the story through. Enjoy the mystery. And have a blessed Christmas.