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Christmas Vigil - 24 December 2021

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24 December 2021

The Nativity of the Lord Christmas Vigil

Reflection by Joe Tedesco

Introduction

Mary will give birth to a son, and he will be called Jesus. God's saving plan is unfolding in our midst, God is coming to be with us as one of us! Now, no one need be called 'forsaken' or 'abandoned' again.

Penitential Act

Use one of the *Roman Missal* texts or this optional litany form:

Lord Jesus, by your birth you brought hope to the world.
Lord, have mercy.

You came so that all people may be saved.
Christ, have mercy.

You are the Prince of Peace.
Lord, have mercy.

First Reading

Isaiah 62:1–5

God's deep love for God's people bursts forth in emotional imagery akin to a groom's love for his bride. This love causes the people to escape the clutches of abandonment and desolation.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 88(89):4–5, 16–17, 27, 29

For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

The psalm echoes Isaiah in the delight of a covenant that will endure.

Second Reading

Acts 13:16-17, 22-25

In line with the words of today's Psalm, Paul expresses how Jesus is the high point of the story of salvation built on the tradition of David.

Gospel Reading

Matthew 1:1-25 or Matthew 1:18-25

Through the people of Israel, God's chosen people, the Lord has shown that God longs to be close to us. Now, through the faithfulness of Joseph and Mary, God will be made fully present in Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Reflection

The Christmas story typically told around this time of year, though obviously most heavily relying on the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, is well understood to be an amalgamation of all the Gospel narratives and some non-Biblical material as well (the beautiful but most definitely apocryphal Drummer Boy legend being one example). However, close attention to the Christmas narratives as they appear in the Gospels is always a good place to find fuller meaning of the season.

In Matthew's version we see Joseph featured and the narrative is driven through Mary's betrothed more than any other figure. Further, the first mention of Jesus himself seems somewhat unremarkable; Mary is 'found to be with child' (1:18). It is a discovery that is being made rather than an announcement proclaimed as it is in Luke. It is in Luke's Gospel we have the visitation of the angel Gabriel to Mary announcing God's plan to her and then, from Mary, further celebratory announcing with Elizabeth then Zechariah. In the reading that features in the Midnight Mass, we will have further announcing in another classic scene from the Christmas tale with angels appearing to shepherds singing and praising.

But our Gospel doesn't have that for us this evening. It is more subdued and restrained in feel. There are no grand announcements made to Joseph, Mary or anyone else. Even when the Magi appear on the scene, an event that has become understood as the visitation of the 'three wise men of the East' which will feature on Epiphany Sunday, there is no announcement. The Magi are understood to have discerned a 'new king' was being born because of their observation of celestial events. They, like Joseph, find the 'new King of the Jews' rather than have it declared to them. The 'flight to Egypt', again a unique feature of Matthew, adds to the intriguing nature of the infancy narrative. Secret escapes and quiet covert movements rather than bold proclamations seem to feature.

It is something of a cliché of Christmas to recognise the true 'reason for the season' is easily missed. The preparations for the day itself, the gift buying (sometimes desperate and last-minute), the work Christmas parties, the start of school holidays – there are all number of things that pull us away from the heart of Christmas which is the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We tend to think of this as a modern

issue, a problem particular for our times where increased secularism joins with seemingly endless consumerism in an inescapable pincer that all but squeezes the true meaning of Christmas out of view. With that in mind, Matthew's tone is telling. Though the circumstances themselves are quite different, it has always been hard to gather what God is doing at Christmas.

Returning to the Gospel reading itself, Joseph has no idea at first. All he (and we along with him) are told is that Mary is with child. Luke fills in the details of how and when Mary knows what is going on, but that perspective is not present in Matthew's version. Rather, as mentioned, it is Joseph's perspective which is most prominent, and he simply begins the process of nullifying the betrothal as would be quite customary in the day. The quiet way Joseph was set to do so was a sign of his respect for Mary and his righteous character. That this child is all part of God's doing and plan from the very beginning is not recognised – and why should it be given the information provided? The only clue given is the long genealogy offered in the longer version of our Gospel reading. But this sits as a prologue to the narrative, not a feature of it – a scene setter typical of the style Matthew is writing in. Joseph may be aware of his heritage, but Mary being 'found with child' does not directly sit in line with traditional understanding even if this were a clue.

That Joseph could so easily miss the occasion is testimony to how easy it might be for us to miss this wonderful and most precious gift of God's presence. It comes as something looking like one thing but is actually something quite different. It appears the occasion to end the relationship with Mary but is, actually, the reason why Joseph is to draw her and her precious child even closer to form the most vital community that we can have – the family unit. A necessary framework in which Jesus is to grow into the adult whose ministry will bring God's saving activity into full view.

Christmas is about many things, but perhaps this version of the story reminds us of how hidden God can be in our world. That God is with us in our very existence is given due testimony in our reading. That Jesus is titled Emmanuel, 'God-is-with-us', clearly expresses this. However, God's presence is not always obvious. In some ways it looks ahead to the ultimate purpose of Jesus' life which was to lay it down at Calvary, an event which looks like death will burst forth in new fullness of life offered to all. But well before that event, here at Christmas we are called to look carefully at our world. What looks like plans going awry, may well be God doing a new and precious thing. Just like the vulnerable infant child of Christmas, what looks like precarious helplessness may well be the very place God's most powerful saving activity can manifest.

God is ever present, even in events and moments where it seems most unlikely. We would do well to have the heart of Joseph who is calm and honourable and, perhaps most importantly, open to hearing God's prompting in the quietness of the heart. Bold, colourful and enthusiastic celebration has its place at Christmas and other occasions besides, but so does quiet peaceful reflection. Let us make sure we are open to God's movements and find pleasant surprise in just how wonderfully subtle our God can be, quietly closer to us than we may ever imagine.

Prayer of the Faithful

Introduction

As we gather here tonight to share the wonderful story of our salvation through the Incarnation, let us prayerfully offer the needs of our families and community to our Father.

Petitions

We pray for the leaders of our Church who must witness to the world the coming of our Saviour. May they be strengthened to do the will of God and ~~and~~ to walk humbly with Pope Francis towards a more synodal Church.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for leaders of all nations that they will honour their own people and serve their needs with honesty and integrity. We pray too that there will be respect and equitable distribution of vaccines and medicines throughout the world.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those who are suffering or in need at Christmas. May they be given support and comfort so that they truly know how the Spirit works in the world.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for families who are separated at this time of the year and have been separated because of COVID-19. May their unity in love be evident in some meaningful way and may they find a way to celebrate Jesus' birth.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those who mourn family members at Christmas, particularly those who have died from the pandemic. May their grief be eased by the love of those around them.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those who work in the hospitality industry. May the people they serve throughout this season be filled with a spirit of love and gentleness and may their patrons choose to be patient.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

Conclusion

Father, we offer these needs with real confidence in the love that you have shown us through the birth of your Son. We make our prayer through the power of the Spirit and in the name of Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

Music selections by Alessio Loiacono and Chris deSilva

GA

Angels we have heard on high. French Carol. 286
Away in a manger. J. McFarland/ W. Kirkpatrick. 289
Hark! the herald angels sing. C. Wesley/ F. Mendelssohn. 294
Joy to the world. I. Watts/ G. F. Handel. 295
O come, all ye faithful. J. Wade. 287 (Verses 1-3)
O little town of Bethlehem. P. Brooks/ L. Redner. 296
Once in royal David's city. H. Gauntlett/ C. F. Alexander. 297
The first Nowell. English text and melody. 298 (Verses 1, 2, 4& 6)

AOV1

Hark! the herald angels sing. C. Wesley/ F. Mendelssohn. 171
Joy to the world. I. Watts/ G. F. Handel. 170
O come, all ye faithful. J. Wade. 167 (Verses 1-2)
The first Nowell. English text and melody. 169 (Verses 1, 2 & 5)
What child is this? W. C. Dix/ English melody. 165 (Verses 1-2)

AOV2

Angels we have heard on high. French Carol. 140
Sing we, sing we Noel. K. Poelker. 124

AOV4Kids

And did you see Him little star? C. Gibson/ H. Clyde. 60
Out on the road to Bethlehem. M. Nicol. 61
Baby lying in a manger. P. Combe. 63
Can this really be true? L. Newton/ T. Wittwer. 64

AOVNG

Emmanuel. Raymond Badham. 40
Let the season shine. Judy Bailey. 87

CWB

A child is born in Bethlehem. Tr. Ralph Wright OSB. 612
Unto us a boy is born. Tr. Percy Dearmer. 849

CWBII

Good Christians all, rejoice. John Mason Neale. 261
Unto us a child is born! Tr. Percy Dearmer. 273

S&S2

Born this day. Ken Canedo. 296

Psalms Selected by Chris deSilva and Angela McCarthy

Psalm 88: *For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.*

Psalm 88: Stephen Somerville/Christopher Willcock SJ. CWB 385

Psalm 89: I will sing for ever: Roger Heagney. GA 50

Psalm 89 (88): Jenny O'Brien. JOBC pg. 14

Forever I will sing. LPSF Tony Alonso. pg.6

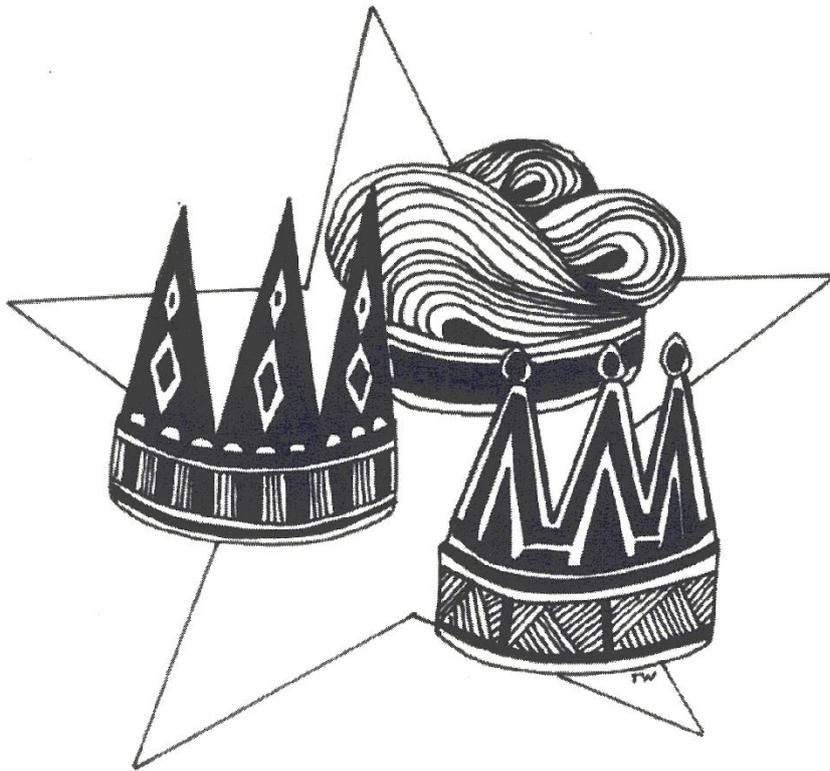
Music selections by Michael Mangan

Glory to God (TT/SYJ) [Gathering, Recessional]

Glory, gloria (STAR) [Children, Gathering, Recessional]

There is a child (TT/SYJ) *based on Is 9:1-7*

This little boy (TT/SYJ) [Non-Scriptural Reflection - Gifts]



**Three wise men came
from the East.**