**Christmas Day 2022**

There are three different sets of Readings for Christmas depending on the time of day the Mass is celebrated which means I cannot know which ones you will hear!

I have therefore written a short general introduction to the Nativity stories (largely reproducing that of last year)

With the establishment of Christianity in the 4th century, the 25th December was chosen to replace the popular heathen *Natalis Solis Invicti.* It seems to have spread westwards from Rome from about 336 A.D. There was already a Feast of the Epiphany in the eastern sees of Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria. This fell on the 6th January and commemorated the Baptism of Christ. This was at first the more important of the two, but from the later 4th century, it was also associated with the Nativity and the actual date varied with local custom. Jerusalem observed the Nativity on the 6th January until 549 A.D. and the Armenian Church still does to the present day.

Having said all this, the actual date is extremely unlikely to have occurred in either December or January! Winter in Bethlehem is bitterly cold and a time for shepherds and sheep to remain indoors. There was no purpose in going outside until the spring brought the new growth for grazing. Clement of Alexandria, (c. 150 – c. 215 A.D.) suggested that Christ was born on the 20th May. But the Nativity stories that we have inherited do not reflect our fixation on historical accuracy.

 At face value the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke tell of implausible scenes accompanying the birth of Jesus. There is no doubt that Jesus was a historical person and as such must have had a birth. Yet it should not surprise us to learn that the real value of the detail that Matthew and Luke record is not historical. It is too important to be historical.

Matthew and Luke wrote sixty-five years after the event and *only because they had witnessed his resurrection*. They had not been present at the birth but they had no doubt that as the end of his earthly life had been miraculous, then so must have been its beginning. As God had approved his death, so likewise, he must have planned his birth and his disciples considered that they would be able to unearth the evidence to prove it.

So, for example, see Matthew 2;14-15. Eight centuries before, Hosea had said, ‘*I called my son out of Egypt’* Now Hosea was referring to the 14th century B.C. Exodus. The Patriarch Joseph had gone to Egypt (Genesis 39) and Israel, a metaphorical son, had returned to a new life in Canaan, while Egypt’s sons perished. (Exodus 12;29-30)

Now Matthew believed that Jesus was the Son of God and that Joseph and Mary had fled to Egypt, returning to Nazareth, symbolically repeating history. So he cites ancient texts to show that the birth of Jesus had been planned from the beginning. Its value for us is that it gives weight to the Egyptian sojourn because if that had not happened, then Matthew would never have quoted Hosea. He would have found another text to suit the circumstances.

Another example, shared by Matthew (1;23) and Luke (1;31) quotes Isaiah 7;14, *A virgin shall conceive and bear a son*. The Hebrew simply means ‘a young woman of marriageable age’ but the Greek translation that they used has ‘*parthenos*’ which specifically meant ‘*a young girl before she has had sexual intercourse*’ Isaiah was speaking about contemporary events unrelated to his far distant future. But the gospel writers use of this particular translation demonstrates that Mary gave birth to Jesus before her marriage to Joseph.

In our day we have, happily, come to realise that all the infancy narratives - which are wholly independent of each other - are, first and foremost, Christological statements. They do not tell us details of what happened, but they do tell us what those who later knew Jesus best, believed about him. It is along this line, and only here, that we can grasp their true value. An overall look at these texts is appropriate as an introduction to the readings of Christmastide.

In the infancy stories, Matthew and Luke agree on only two things. Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth. For Matthew, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem offered no problem. As he understood it, Bethlehem was where Joseph and Mary lived. He has to move Jesus from Bethlehem to Nazareth which he does via Egypt.

For Luke, on the other hand, the home of Joseph and Mary had been Nazareth. He has to arrange to have Jesus born in Bethlehem which he does by Quirinius’ census. Luke explicitly mentions the care he has taken over historical details (1;2) which date Jesus’ nativity to around 6-7 B.C. Quirinius, however was Governor of Syria from 6-7 A.D. and censuses for taxation were so common that it is impossible to know which one Luke means.

But, then, it may be that we have tended to take Luke too literally. His underlying conviction would seem to lie in the fact that even the Emperor Augustus was, unwittingly, an instrument of the Lord.

From 27 B.C. to 180 A.D. the Empire enjoyed its longest period of relative peace and security which came to be called the *Pax Romana* or the *Pax Augusta* after Augustus, who was accordingly titled ‘Saviour’ In the annunciation to the shepherds (2: 8-14) the angels reinterpret the event and give it its true meaning: It is this child who is the real Saviour, Messiah and Lord. Through his decree it came to pass that Jesus the Jewish Messiah, of whom he had no knowledge, was born in the city of David fulfilling Jewish prophecy.

The style of the proclamation (vv. 10-11) and the canticle, the Gloria (2:14), is typical of Imperial language, but instead applied to Jesus who is the bringer of real complete and enduring peace (Hebrew *shalom*).

So, apart from understanding what his compatriots thought of him, is there any unwitting information we can deduce from the stories? There is only one person that is witness to the whole story from first to last and that is – his mother.

From the first, Mary is the caring mother, solicitously wrapping her baby and laying him in a manger-cradle. Manger and swaddling clothes symbolize God's care and protection. (see footnote) Luke is not suggesting anything supernatural about the birth - merely insisting that the *'handmaid of the Lord*' is, in her loving care, reflecting God's care.

His mother is the only person who constitutes a physical thread from the birth of Jesus to his resurrection. She achieves that by being a believer and a disciple (Luke 8:19-21; 11:27-28; Acts 1:12-14). Luke presents her as the model disciple. Apart from the profound symbolism, the simple circumstances of Jesus' birth are eloquent. He was born in poverty and the very first to be invited to share in the joy of Mary and Joseph were simple country folk, shepherds guarding their sheep. They are the first and the model for all future believers.

This is what Luke intends us to understand when he says that Mary *'treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart*' (2:19 and 2;51). She, like the Twelve, will come to full understanding only when Jesus finally rises from the dead. Until then, in the obscurity of faith, these puzzling events are mysterious.

The picture of Mary that Luke gives us from his own knowledge, is that of a loving and capable mother. Furthermore, she is a deeply thoughtful woman. And she is a woman of faith who lived her life in faith. Jesus was in good hands. His story has begun.

Footnote. The word for ‘swaddling’ is only used here (Luke 2;7 & 12) and in Job 38;9 where it describes the clouds enveloping the earth.