

***“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour,
who is Christ the Lord.” (St. Luke 2.11)***

As some of you may already know, a little over a year ago I adopted a cat. Some might say I even rescued this 10-year-old girl from a home with four busy boys under the age of ten. In this last year, I have come to a conclusion that some of you have perhaps heard me say before: I think she would make a good Christian. Why? Because she lives in constant hope. In the busy household from which she came, it seems to me that she ate very well in a kitchen that might not have, shall we say, accounted for *all* the food. So, anytime my wife or I even seem like we might be about to prepare a meal, suddenly raspy meows start coming from the floor, eventually with more and more desperate attempts to get to the source of what smells (or sometimes even sounds) good. She lives in constant hope that one day her wish will come true, that one day all the food will be hers, and the pesky people won't be in the way anymore.

It is this idea of radical hope, sometimes even irrational hope, that we come to face when we celebrate both Christ's birth *and* his resurrection at Easter. They are intricately tied together: you cannot have a resurrection to life without first being born. Also, as we have been talking about throughout the season of Advent, Christians also have hope that Christ will come again at the day of final judgement. As Christians, our whole existence is based on hope: hope that God *will* act, seeing our hope realized that God *does* act, and hoping that God will *continue* to act as he has promised. We are a hope-based people, it's what we do, just like a hopeful cat waiting for the forbidden food.

This night fills us with hope because it is far more than what our society would like to think it is: a night for cheerfulness and presents, for parties and happy songs. We talk about the “Spirit of Christmas”, and retain all sorts of traditions that evoke powerful emotional responses for us. But *why* do these cheerful things remind us of Christmas? Why is Joy an associated response? Certainly, to an extent, we have good marketing to thank for that, but it goes much deeper. We as humans yearn for something more, we want there to be an explanation for everything. But what does Christmas have to do with that? Of course, my answer is that the *something more* that we all seek is God, and specifically at Christmas, Jesus his son. We in the modern western world are trained to think of God as distant and impersonal, existing only in the spiritual realm. Sure, you might feel that he is close and personal, but at a societal level that is not the perception. There is the spiritual realm, and then there is reality, many will say, and ne'er the two shall meet. When you are barrelling down the aisles at Costco getting cut off by the other shoppers, where is God in that? We don't understand God to be with us in our daily lives. We compartmentalize him, we know where to find him when we need him. At Christmas, we go to Church, and then the rest of it doesn't involve God, it involves presents and dinner and family. Fair enough. But rather than portray a distant and impersonal, compartmentalized God, I would propose that Christmas does the exact opposite.

In Holy Scripture we are presented with two “birth narratives” of Jesus: one from the Gospel according to Matthew, and the other from Luke, which we read tonight. St. Matthew, whose Gospel assumes an audience of primarily Jewish readers, goes to great lengths to prove that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the prophecies, and tells the story of the announcement of Christ's birth from the perspective of his adopted father, Joseph. In this story, the angel tells Joseph that the son his to-be wife carries will be named Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1.21). All of which has been done to fulfill the prophecy from Isaiah, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us)” (Matt. 1.23). Here we get some important details about Jesus: (1) Jesus was being born into the house of David, as Joseph was a descendant of King David; (2) Jesus or *Jesua* will be his name, which means “YHWH is Salvation”, and the nature of his salvation is that he will save his people from their sins; (3) The angel connects the child to the prophecy of Immanuel, God with us. This is not an insignificant message.

In the narrative from the Gospel of Luke, which we read, we hear of the classic story of the birth of Jesus in the stable of Bethlehem. Luke sets the stage in historical terms to pinpoint the moment in history to the best of his ability, and that the decree of the Roman emperor sent the holy family to the city of David to be registered. While there, Mary's time came to deliver her baby, but there was nowhere for them to go, so they were relegated to the stable to be amongst the animals. They were basically treated as animals themselves, but here in this lowly stable the greatest of babies was born, for this was no ordinary baby: it was the son of God, and with the gift of hindsight we know how important he was. Soon after the birth, the

shepherds in nearby fields were alerted by angels to the great miracle that just took place, and that they should go and worship their God.

This image of the stable has become the quintessential representation of the Nativity, and has been long interpreted as both a physical event and a theological revelation by the writers and theologians of the early Church.¹ Firstly, while we often think of the stable as a wooden structure, as we have represented here, scholarly evidence and local tradition suggests that the people of Bethlehem used caves hewn into the rock as stables for their animals, so we can think of it more as an alcove. In this alcove, on a manger laid a baby swaddled tightly, which the ancient writers equated to the bandages around Christ's body in the tomb. He was the sacrificial lamb prepared from the very onset, and as such, some writers saw the manger as a kind of altar. St. Augustine took this a step further in a way that at first sounds almost shocking: "The manger is the place where animals find their food. But now, lying in the manger, is he who [will call] himself the true bread come down from heaven the true nourishment that we need in order to be fully ourselves. This is the food that gives us true life, eternal life. Thus the manger becomes a reference to the table of God, to which we are invited so as to receive the bread of God. From the poverty of Jesus' birth emerges the miracle in which [humanity]'s redemption is mysteriously accomplished."

Furthermore, while no animals are explicitly mentioned in the story, the manger itself implies the presence of animals. The early Church read into this Isaiah 1:3, "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Peter Stuhlmacher, a German theologian of the 20th century, points out that the Greek version of Habbakuk 3:2 may well have contributed here, too: "In the midst of two living creatures you will be recognized... when the time has come, you will appear." This reading further suggests a connection to Exodus 25 and the description of the Ark of the Covenant. This would suggest that the manger has become the new Ark, where the Ox and Donkey represent all humanity, both Jews and Gentiles, coming to acknowledge God. Christian iconography has long associated these two animals to the manger, and now they complete any representation of the crib.

What these Gospels do for us, through their layered representation, is show us God's concrete action. Here is not a God playing a hide-and-seek game in the spiritual realm, this is no Greek demi-God fooling around on earth. There is no cosmic revolution nor physical encounter between God and human beings. Instead, we have the birth of the New Adam, who hearkens in a new creation, a new beginning for the relationship between God and his creation, because this baby was God in the flesh: God with Us, our Emmanuel. This was God taking concrete action in a way he did only one more time: at the resurrection when Jesus burst through the iron doors of death. In these two moments, and in these two moments only in the life of Jesus, God intervenes directly in the material, tangible, world.

This is a scandal to the modern spirit², for we "allow" God to act in ideas and thoughts – in "thoughts and prayers" only – which are understood to be *not* concrete interventions. But here God does not act within the box we've made for him, nor does he colour inside the lines. God instead blows our mind by doing exactly what he's always done: interact with his creation, and even fully embrace it to live a human life. And each time we celebrate Christmas, each time we look at a stable, we are reminded of this, even subconsciously. God, our creator and our redeemer, who we think of as distant and impersonal is instead presented in the flesh in the fullness of humanity and humility – born an infant in the home of animals. God with us, Emmanuel, who has sanctified our human condition: who has made us holy by becoming one of us, by sacrificing himself upon the cross for us, all for the cleansing of our sins.

For Jesus is the *something more* we as a society seeks each Christmas, even if we won't acknowledge it. "YHWH is salvation": our creator is also our saviour. Hence the conception and birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary is a fundamental element of our faith and a radiant sign of hope. The hope we are filled with this night reminds us that God has taken concrete action, and urges us to look ahead to his promise to do more: to come again and rule and judge the earth. So we can be jubilant, we can rejoice, for God walks among us.

O Come, let us adore him.

Amen.

¹ The following makes frequent reference and draws on ideas from Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (Bloomsbury, 2012).

² Per Ratzinger & Barth