

Readings for the Vigil Mass, celebrated on Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:1-7 · *A Son is given to us*

The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone. You have made their gladness greater, you have made their joy increase; they rejoice in your presence as men rejoice at harvest time, as men are happy when they are dividing the spoils. For the yoke that was weighing on him, the bar across his shoulders, the rod of his oppressor, these you break as on the day of Midian. For all the footgear of battle, every cloak rolled in blood, is burnt and consumed by fire. For there is a child born for us, a son given to us and dominion is laid on his shoulders; and this is the name they give him: Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God, Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace. Wide is his dominion in a peace that has no end, for the throne of David and for his royal power, which he establishes and makes secure in justice and integrity. From this time onwards and for ever, the jealous love of the Lord of Hosts will do this.

Psalm 95:1-3,11-13 R. *Today a saviour has been born to us: he is Christ the Lord.*

O sing a new song to the Lord, sing to the Lord all the earth. O sing to the Lord, bless his name.

R

Proclaim his help day by day, tell among the nations his glory
and his wonders among all the peoples.

R

Let the heavens rejoice and earth be glad, let the sea and all within it thunder praise,
let the land and all it bears rejoice, all the trees of the wood shout for joy
at the presence of the Lord for he comes, he comes to rule the earth.

R

With justice he will rule the world, he will judge the peoples with his truth.

R

Titus 2:11-14 · God's grace has been revealed to the whole human race

God's grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race and taught us that what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God, and all our worldly ambitions; we must be self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in this present world, while we are waiting in hope for the blessing which will come with the Appearing of the glory of our great God and saviour Christ Jesus. He sacrificed himself for us in order to set us free from all wickedness and to purify a people so that it could be his very own and would have no ambition except to do good.

Alleluia, alleluia! I bring you news of great joy: today a saviour has been born to us, Christ the Lord. Alleluia! Lk2:10-11

Luke 2:1-14 'In the town of David a saviour has been born to you'

Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken. This census – the first – took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to his own town to be registered. So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and travelled up to Judaea, to the town of David called Bethlehem, since he was of David's House and line, in order to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn. In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' And suddenly with the angel there was a great throng of the heavenly host, praising God and singing: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to men who enjoy his favour.'

The Story of the Christmas Crib By Fr. Alfred McBride, O. Praem.

On this most touching of Christian feasts, let us hear again the story of one of our popular customs—the Christmas Crib.

In the last year of his life, Francis of Assisi told his friends, “This will be my final Christmas. I want to celebrate it in a new way.” Francis had a friend in the lovely mountain town of Greccio. His friend owned some land on a hillside opposite the town. Several grotto-like caves lined the hilly property. His friend gave him and his brothers the land to use as a hermitage.

Francis and a few of his disciples moved there at the beginning of advent. Francis confided to his friend that he would like one cave to be transformed into a Bethlehem scene. His friend lined the cave with straw. He installed a manger filled with straw and brought in an ox and a donkey.

On the side he placed a small altar for Mass.

About an hour before midnight, the people of the village of Greccio came in procession to celebrate Christmas with Francis. Their stream of lanterns and candles looked like stars coming across the valley. As they sang the laude, the ancient Christmas carols of Umbria, they seemed to echo the Gloria of the angels in Luke’s Gospel.

When they arrived at the cave, they were charmed by the sight of the ox and donkey and manger. And none more delighted than their children. The Eucharistic celebration began. At homily time, Francis stood by the manger to talk about the birth of Jesus. A spell of religious awe overtook the listeners. One account says that at the end of the homily, a gold light filled their assembly.

They saw Francis reach into the empty manger and lift out a baby and cradle him in his arms.

And then he held the baby out to them, saying: “My brothers and sisters, behold the Saviour of the world.” And all of them were joined as one in the mystery of the Incarnation.

After the Eucharist, Francis disappeared. Not until dawn, when the morning star hovered in the sky, did someone find him. He was absorbed in prayer, his face turned toward Bethlehem.

And that is how our custom of having a Christmas crib began. Through the centuries, Christians have found a thousand ways to create their own version of the crib. By bringing to life the Christmas scene, millions of believers have been put in touch with this profound mystery of God’s love for us. What does Francis teach us by his Vision of the Crib?

See the simplicity of God’s mystery. Our education makes us look at the complicated side of life. Our culture prizes the complexity of a scientific world. The result is we approach God as such a confusing reality that we fail to see the simplicity of his love. Francis brings us a birth room and a child on a hillside. He tells us that God has the simplicity of this child.

Observe how God comes amid the poor. Since God is the greatest there is, it seems to us he should be found in the palaces of the mighty. Francis builds his crib scene on a road near a poor village. God is always to be found among the poor, the needy, the suffering.

See how human God can be. What is more captivating than a few hundred families singing carols at midnight beneath a starry sky in the hills of Umbria? What is more soul satisfying than cradling a baby with love in the mountain air? What better way could God have chosen to show how much he thinks of us? What better method could Francis have picked to communicate how caring God is?

As we gather by the altar and the Crib, let us say Gloria and thanks to the Holy Child who brings us such joy... And another thanks to Francis for the glorious idea of a crib.

PRAYER: Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God. Glory to you on this feast of your birth in Bethlehem. We are grateful for the simplicity of your mystery. We are ennobled by your choice to come into the world as a human being. We are inspired to search for you among the poor and the humble and to be humble and poor in our own way. We rejoice in your birth and seek to live better lives as a result. Amen