

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Christmas Eve
December 24, 2017

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The great glory of Christmas is that it shows us God. The Incarnation expresses Divine character in the terms of a human life. That is something we can understand. When we wonder what God is like we do not have to resort to sorcerers or Ouija boards! We have only to look at Jesus. When we wonder what to do we weigh our various options against the template of what Jesus did.

And what did Jesus do? He was born in a stable and His first improvised resting place was a manger where cattle are fed! Saint Paul, who found out the hard way about the various merits of strength and weakness, declared “The weakness of God is stronger than man and the foolishness of God is wiser than man.” And Almighty God, Who knows we are full of pride and self-assertiveness, that we will resist any revelation of Divine Majesty and Power, instead offers Himself to us as a little Baby lying in a cattle-feeding trough.

A cynic might read the Christmas story and conclude Mary and Joseph were disorganized and dysfunctional. They hadn’t planned sufficiently, and so a cruddy stable is what they deserve for waiting to the last minute. But a more careful and honest reading of the Scriptures leads to a different conclusion. Nothing written therein happens by accident. The birth of Christ down to the details we know and love, had the deliberate foreknowledge of Almighty God. Again, it is St Paul who reminds us that “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” (*Galatians* 4:4) When in God’s Wisdom the moment had come, the moment for which the eternal ages had been waiting, then the hour struck which never can be struck again, God the Son leapt out of Eternity into time, passed by all the most glorious stars to reach this cold and dark earth of ours, taking not upon Him the nature of angels, but chose that of man, a little lower than the angels. “Amazed, the Seraphim behold their King descend, disguised, to this heir of crimes and woes.” (Silvio Pellico’s poem *Dio amore*)

Bethlehem was no mistake! It wasn’t a moment’s whimsy or romanticism on God’s part. When the Wise Men later inquired of King Herod, his scholars searched the Scriptures and said “*Go to Bethlehem.*” One night just before Christmas some other travelers passed by the magnificent palace of Herod, with its countless lights and clangor of soldiers’ armor, and which had the houses of the

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well-to-do clustered at its base. Mary and Joseph did not stop as they made their way, footsore and covered with dust, to the cow shed where God would be born. The first court of God Incarnate was a group of peasant shepherds and some cattle.

And it is all very *deliberate*. It all seems rather *ordinary* too, nothing to call our notice. I sometimes wonder about living in that time, in Jerusalem, or suburban Bethlehem, and missing the events of that Holy Night and the following days. Sometimes we read the morning papers telling of some great event in the city yesterday and wishing we had known about it in advance. Years ago I remember being in downtown Chicago shopping in a department store. Coming out onto the street I noticed policemen and barricades and some ticker tape, only to find out Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia had been in a motorcade and I had just missed it. It is too bad to be so close and miss out!

But this event was *ordinary*. That is what the birthday of God was on the surface of things. It wasn't a holiday or holy day on anybody's calendar this side of Heaven. No ticker tape parade! The shepherds had to go to work on Christmas Eve. And in the middle of their night shift something we can only inadequately call *glory* came to them. It told them to *go to Bethlehem*. Does that advice sound familiar? Caesar Augustus said in effect "*go to Bethlehem*" So also did Herod's Bible scholars. And what did the shepherds do? Scripture says "they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger." It was just as the angels had told them. Were they disappointed? Again, Scripture is our only guide. It does not tell us what they felt but what they did. They made known abroad the whole story as it had been told them. And so it is easier to believe the shepherds were filled with joy than disappointment. They could have identified with those lepers in *2nd Kings*. When they discovered the Syrians had fled from the siege of Samaria, the lepers said, "This day is a day of good news; if we are silent and wait until the morning light punishment will overtake us; now therefore come, let us go and tell the king's household. (7:9)

Here is God then, deliberately entering our life as the most recent little helpless infant born into the world. He stretched out His hand to His mother in imploring dependence. His voice cried with cold in the manger stall. What did we say of the

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Incarnation? It expresses God's character in terms of human life. Jesus is the mirror of what human life can and ought to be. If as God we worship Him, as man we must take Him as our pattern. And especially at Christmas, the example He gave us is His great humility.

So *go to Bethlehem*. Pay a visit in spirit to the manger. Gaze at the Eternal Son of the Father born in poverty and nakedness, and pray for grace to follow the example of His most blessed life. Have the courage to do what you see, will you? How great the sacrifice may be on your part only you and the Holy Child will know. The world will only know that, strangely enough, you are having a happy holiday. And the world will not quite know what to do with that. It has been that way ever since the first Christmas Eve when the shepherds told their story.