



CHRISTMAS

A Savior Is Born

A Christmas Vision

Fr. Valentine Joseph

A
Christmas
Vision

Fr. Valentine Joseph
Our Lady Queen of Heaven
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Introduction

Each Christmas is unique. Every Christmas celebration is different and is singularly awesome. The incarnation of Jesus is an event of the present day, not a repetition of a past event. Each Christmas is different because it is the manifestation of God's love in Jesus to the world because God is making everything new. We become a new creation when we express our faith in Jesus. It is awesome because the joy it brings to human life surpasses all kinds of happiness we could imagine in life.

I would like to present a small reflection of this awesome reality from my own perspective since every Christmas brings great wonder into my life. I wonder at the new babies who are the manifestation of God's love in this world. I wonder at the loving couples who bring life to humanity. I wonder at the compassion people express for the suffering and needy. In this simple presentation, I would like to examine this wonder in three entities. The first one is Biblical since the infancy narratives are not mere stories, but they are the Words of God. Second, it is theological since the entire revelation of God is centered on Jesus. Thirdly, it is practical because it brings different cultural elements as tips for celebrating Christmas joy

The Biblical vision of Christmas is given to us in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke. The riches have to be unearthed every time because of their symbolic nature. More than merely informative, they proclaim the great love God has revealed for humanity in Jesus. I would like to reflect on the biblical events of the Infancy Narratives in a brief way. Many scholars consider them as mythological rather than historical. This is not true. The narration of history at that time is totally different from our time. It included events, meaning and interpretation. These events were orally transmitted from one group to another; from one time to another, before they were written.

The theological aspect is reflecting on the importance of Christmas in the entire perspective of salvation history. Easter is the focal event in the salvation brought by Jesus. In what way is Christmas related to Easter and how do we celebrate Easter in Christmas itself? The elements of the death and resurrection of Christ are beautifully blended in the Christmas events. Discovering these elements is not only for study purposes, but also for understanding the mystery of the incarnation of God in the human world.

The practical dimension is the relevance of Christmas in today's world. It may be a holiday for some people; or a business for others. It may be a family gathering for some. But, if we do not capture the very mystery of Christmas, we lose a lot. We pass by a wonderful thing that gives meaning to our lives. We miss an opportunity in which God comes to our lives. Religion is a symbolic reality. If we participate in the symbolic exchanges that happen in religion, we cherish them and that makes our lives eternal. It takes away the death anxiety, fear complexes and negative thinking from our hearts and minds and makes us live fully and wonderfully.

I. Biblical presentation of Christmas

The Bible is a wonder of human life. It is not a book, but a collection of books; it was not written at a particular time; but at different times. It was not written by a human author. It is of divine origin manifested through several gospels. The Christmas stories told by different authors have to be seen together as one message from God who is the author of our salvation. I would like to start my reflection with the genealogy of Jesus presented by different authors.

1. Genealogy

The first one to give a detailed account of the genealogy of Jesus is (Matthew 1: 1-17). He writes to Jewish Christians. The Jews were very particular about their traditions, their proper ancestors. They had a great expectation that the Messiah would come in the dynasty of David, the king par excellence in Israel's history. Since Matthew was writing to the Jewish Christians, he wanted to prove the origin of Jesus as the son of Abraham and the son of David. Abraham is a father of three religions; Jewish, Islamic and Christian. There are different ways to establish the family line of Abraham. For Jews, the line chosen by God to reveal the Messiah is the line of Jacob and David. In the line of Jacob emerged King David. He established the kingdom of Israel. God promised David that his descendents will rule, not only Israel, but the whole world. Israel people expected the fulfillment of this promise. Matthew wrote the genealogy of Jesus in such a way that brings the ruler of the world from the line of Abraham, Jacob and David. It is interesting to note three sections in the genealogy. The first is from Abraham to David fourteen generations. The second one is from David to Babylonian exile, fourteen generations. The third one is from the time of exile to Jesus, fourteen generations. Everything is centered on David. The number 14 in the Bible symbolizes David.

It is also interesting to note four women in the genealogy who are not of Jewish origin. They are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. The women were from a different race. They were all women of ill reputation, except for Ruth. Matthew was particular to establish the racial purity of the Jewish origin. Why does he mention these women in the genealogy? I think Matthew had a particular reason. Even though Jesus belongs to the Jewish race, he is not for the Jewish people alone. He is the redeemer of all humanity. Non-Jewish people have also participated in the history of the redeemer. In this way, Matthew establishes Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus brings a new covenant, new law and new humanity by His birth.

The genealogy of Jesus, according to Luke is totally different from that of Matthew. It is not addressed at the beginning of the gospel like Matthew (Lk 3: 23 -38). It is revealed before the public ministry of Jesus. People would have asked the important question, “Who is this preacher and what is his origin?” Luke explicitly wants to prove Jesus is the Son of God who belongs to all, not only the Jewish people. He reaches back in the line of descendants with the mother of Jesus going back to Adam, the first man. There seems a contradiction, but sources of both authors are different and the motives of both authors are different. In ancient times, people had several names and might have been referred to differently. Both Matthew and Luke tell us one important fact. Jesus is the son of God. A new creation started with Jesus and He leads people to a different realm, the people of the Kingdom of God.



In the gospel of John we see the genealogy of Jesus. He starts his gospel with the words 'in the beginning' like the first book of the Bible, Genesis. "In the beginning" was the Word, the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and without Him not one thing came into being. What came into being in Him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (Jn 1: 1-5). In the prologue, John gives the cosmic genealogy. He does not want to speak about the human origin at all. In His time, the divinity of Jesus was totally evident for the Christians. Jesus is the unique Incarnation of God.

St. Paul also gives a beautiful discourse on the divinity of Jesus as the Son of God. "He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creatures. In Him, everything in heaven and on earth was created, things visible and invisible" (Col 1: 15). The letters of St. Paul were written before the shaping of the gospels in different communities. The realization of Jesus as the Son of God came first at the resurrection. Then, the disciples pondered over different events that took place in the ministry of Jesus to recall the divinity of Jesus and finally they went through the history, the birth of Jesus. They collected stories that happened during those times. Mary would have been a great resource. All the stories were narrated in different communities and compiled in the gospels. The important message is clear from every account. Jesus is the Son of God who came in this world in a unique and extraordinary way to reveal the great love of God for humanity.

2. Mother of God

The second thing that fascinates me in the Infancy Narratives is the introduction of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Jesus is both the Son of God and the Son of Mary. That is the constant theme in the story of the infant Jesus. How could this be possible? Jesus' virgin birth and His resurrection from the dead, writes Pope Benedict in his commentary on "Infancy Narratives" are the two moments in the gospels when "God intervenes directly into the material world." Those who believe in the resurrection of Jesus should not have any question about the virgin birth of Jesus. God used Mary as a vessel of His divine intervention into humanity. Matthew quotes the prophet (Isaiah 7:14) in chapter (1: 22-23) as "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and His name shall be called Immanuel" Here, many people quote the original Hebrew version of Isaiah in which the word *almah* is used, meaning young woman. But Matthew uses the Greek translation *parthenos* that means virgin. He uses it purposefully to indicate the virgin birth. The people who read the annunciation event could not doubt the virgin birth of Jesus in the accounts themselves. It is clear to the core.

Any reader who reads the account of the Infancy Narratives with devotion and respect have no doubt in the continual virginity of the Blessed Mother. It is obvious that the divinity that elevated Mary to the status of Divine Motherhood would have kept her for that purpose all through life. God chose a virgin to be the mother of His son. A girl who accepted the will of God and would remain a virgin all through her life, pondering the wonder of God revealed in her. The brothers and sisters mentioned in the gospel are Mary's nephews and nieces. In Asian culture, all the close relatives are called brothers and sisters.

There are also some Infancy Narratives written at the time of Matthew and Luke. They are not accepted by the Church as gospels because of their allegoric and mythological nature. However, they have historical value and they help us to understand better the birth of Jesus. One of them is 'Protoevangelium of James written in the second century. It speaks about the early life of Mary. As Jewish tradition allows, Mary was brought up on the temple premises. She learned scriptures and served the synagogue. She was very connected with the couple Zachariah and Elizabeth according to the gospels. Zachariah was a temple priest and his association might have given Mary a great interest in religion. She might have consecrated her virginity to God from the early days of her life.

There is also historical evidence for consecrated celibate life in the time of Blessed Mother. Essens were a group of monks who lived in the caves at that time. There was a sect in Jewish religion called Therapeutae who lived a contemplative life. Celibate life was considered a noble life at that time. John the Baptist and Jesus were celibate. The grace and freedom enjoyed by the Blessed Mother indirectly proves her perpetual virginity. Luke beautifully explains her inner attitudes in the song of Mary, the magnificat. Our Blessed Mother is a unique creation of God for a wonderful purpose. For centuries, the Catholic Church has cherished her grace, prayers and unique role in the salvation of humanity. She is the woman who surpasses all female figures in religions who are considered holy and trustworthy. She is a wonder in religious art, culture and personality. She is a role model for excellence in Christian life.



3. Joseph the Just

God knows the hearts of humans in a special way. He scatters the proud hearted and raises up the lowly. This attitude of God is revealed in the psalms and in the song of Mary. Joseph is the one whose heart was very pleasing to God. He makes him a great hero of the New Testament. Joseph is a hero of deeds, not words. None of his words were recorded in the gospels, but his deeds were honored. I have great respect for his great attitude of prayer. He was praised as a just man in the Bible because of his trust in the Lord. He was a faithful follower of God's laws without any justification. In the time of crisis, he sought the Lord for help. The truth was revealed to him in a dream. He accepted it and honored it by his deeds.

The second thing that I appreciate is his courageous fatherhood. Even though he was not the biological father of Jesus, he never hesitated to fulfill his duties as His earthly father. Jesus was known as the carpenter's son. This statement has a lot to tell us. When Jesus was missing in the crowd in Jerusalem, Mary tells him with all concern, 'your father and I were searching for you'. In the bible itself we see that Jesus obeyed His parents. Joseph might have considered his fatherhood as an honor and he very likely completed his duties with great responsibility and reverence.

All through the history of the Church, we see how Joseph was respected and honored. He is declared as the patron of the Church in general. In many religious congregations, both men and women were named after Joseph. He was a great father to Jesus and husband to Mary. He honored Mary for her role in salvation history by his attitude and love. He is often compared with the Joseph of the Old Testament. Joseph in the Old Testament was a dreamer, provider and protector. Joseph of the New Testament did the same thing. He took Jesus to Egypt and brought him back and protected him, provided for him and honored the holy family by his presence and fatherly love.



4. Expected Messiah

In the time of Jesus, there were many who imagined and projected themselves as the Messiah. They understood very clearly the expectation of the Messiah in the line of king David. Because of their strong and devoted religious faith, many people wanted to assume the role of Messiah. Among them, there were kings like Herod; revolutionaries like Theaudus and Judea (Acts 5:36-37). Historian Flavius mentions more than a dozen who lived in or near the time of Jesus. Many books have been written that indicate how the Messiah was expected from the tribe of Judah who would re-establish the kingdom of Jerusalem and rule over the people of the world. It was more than a dream. It was an expectation that emerged from the promise of God to the covenant people.



5. Holy Innocents

The Hasmonean dynasty ruled Judea from 140 BC till 37 BC. John Hyrcanus was a great hero of the group. He conquered Idumea and wanted all Edomites to observe the Jewish laws faithfully and establish their group as real Jews. Edomites became a powerful group politically and religiously. They could negotiate with Romans and established an alliance. They considered themselves as the saviors of Israel. In the group came a leader called Herod the great. He called himself the son of David. He rebuilt the Jerusalem temple. He killed all who were not accepting him as a king of Jews. In this time, most of the scholars of the scriptures did not consider him as Messiah. They silently revolted against him because he was a murderer and killed his own sons at the fear of their conspiracy against him. Even though he was genius in politics and foreign relationships in favor of Israel, he could not be considered as the expected Messiah. The Infancy Narratives speak of his attitude toward the three wise men who wanted to see Jesus and his killing of innocent babies.

The way of God in revealing Jesus was totally unexpected and unique in this setting of history and the expectation of the true Israel people. I think it is a wonderful way of seeing the work of God in humanity. It is hidden, tiny, and silent. God entered humanity as a breeze that whispered in the pleasant evening. He entered humanity as a tiny bird that sings amidst the sounds of the world. Joseph, Mary, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna and the hundreds of *anawims*, the poor of Yahweh prepared the way. They were insignificant people in the society who expected God to come and rule over the nation. They were the ones who welcomed the King of Kings, the creator of the universe and the alpha and omega of human life.



6. Angels

There is no Christmas without Angels. We decorate for Christmas with Angels. We enact Angels at Christmas events; in all Christmas stories, angels play a definitive part. Do the angels exist in the world? In what way do they affect our lives? The word angel comes from the Greek word 'angelos' which means messengers. They are created by God as pure spirits. They were given freedom to recognize and respond to the love of God. Their main purpose is to worship God. They cannot be proven with scientific tools. Where there is God, there are angels.

There are also fallen angels. Since God gave them freedom, they could choose to worship Him or not. Those angels, who failed to worship God out of their own pride, were punished by God and they became evil spirits. They will be defeated and eliminated definitively one day. That is the final day of the world. Until then they were allowed to prowl around distracting the people from their goal of life, which is to do the will of God in their lives.

In the Bible, we see their presence and active role in salvation history several times. In the Old Testament, they are watchers (Dan 4: 13) and Cherubim (Gen 3: 24). They were going before Israel in their journey to the Holy Land (Ex 32: 34). They were also angels of destruction (Sam 24: 16). Even though they did so many wonderful things at the command of God, they were mainly worshippers of God. They appeared in the places of worship and in a special way, the temple.

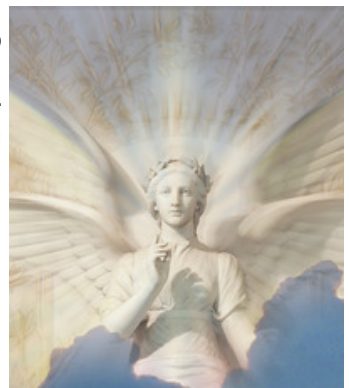
In the Christmas story, we see them as worshippers and messengers. Archangel Gabriel plays a major role as messenger of God to Zachariah and Mary. They are even called by name. When Joseph is in trouble, the angel appears in the dream and reveals God's plans. Angels appear to shepherds and reveal the good news and finally, they worship the savior of the World with Gloria.

When the angels appear to the people there is always a reaction on the part of humans. They are terrified, troubled or glorified. For good people angels are always friends, brothers and sisters. They helped the Apostle Paul in his ministry of the gospel.

Christmas is the time of angelic glory. Uniting with angels, we worship Jesus in a powerful way. They bring an awareness of God's presence in a particular place and in a particular mood. In the life of the Holy Family, we see how they reacted to the angels. The Holy Family felt the supernatural help in the presence of the angels. Angels led them. There was a spiritual communion between angels and the Holy Family.

Those who believe in angels could easily see the presence of God in their lives. Angels are active in some form or other. If we do God's work, the angels come to help us in a supernatural way. Angels protect the children and innocents. St. John XXIII, in his *Journal of the Soul*, beautifully explains the role of guardian angels in his life. When he was a diplomat in France, he used to visit dignitaries. Before going and visiting them, he used to pray to his guardian angel to go and meet the guardian angel of a particular leader and make the visit go smoothly. He has experienced the supernatural help of angels in a profound way.

At Christmas time, angels bring glory to God and peace to the people on earth. They are active in all our Christmas celebrations. They bring people together in the presence of God and bring joy and glory to the celebrations.



7. Shepherds

I am amazed at the event of angels appearing and announcing the good news to the shepherds. The angels normally appear together in the temple, to express Shekinah, the bright and fiery 'glory cloud' that filled the holy of holies at the tabernacle in the temple (Exodus 40: 35). But, the same legion of angels appears to the Shepherds. In the time of Jesus, shepherds were country people who had the smell of sheep. Night and day, they must be alert to tend the sheep. The glory of God is revealed to them by the angels and only in their presence was the wonderful hymn of Gloria sung by the angels: 'Glory to God in the highest and peace to people on earth'. This event is both literal and symbolic. It reveals the nature of the Redeemer; He is both King and Shepherd. It also reminds us of the history of Israel. They were the first nomadic people and the heroes of Israel. Abraham, Moses and David were the first of all shepherds. The term shepherd has a rich meaning. The Lord is my Shepherd is the song that was on the lips of the Israeli people always. One more thing we note in this event, the joy that was exuberant in the minds of the shepherds. They immediately went to the place and saw Jesus with Mary and Joseph and offered them their gifts and returned joyfully. Animals play a major role in the nativity narration. God considered all equal and the good news brought joy even to the animals and nature.



8. Three Wise Men

The story of three Magi brings super imagination in the minds of the people today. They are called three sages from the far away countries. Their names are Melchior, Balthazar and Casper. My father's name is 'Gasparraj', which in my language means king Casper. There is a tradition in India that speaks about the king Casper going to Palestine to visit the Baby Jesus. But, actually, this story has to be seen in the historical context of that time. Persia was known for its wisdom in different areas. People considered Persians as wise people in the world, but, the Jewish people did not like them. They thought that their research and findings were just the human imagination in comparison with the truths revealed to them by God Himself. Even the Romans hated Persians because of their intellectual predictions which were not in line with Rome. These Magi were astronomers who closely traced the movements of the stars and using them to predict the future of the kingdoms of the world.

It is interesting to note the reaction of Herod when he saw the Magi searching for the newborn King. He was humble enough to welcome them. Even though he was a killer, he did not show any anger to them. Instead, he was perplexed by their arrival. He understood the danger that was coming to his throne. He called all his court scholars and consulted them. He acted quickly. He was ready to eliminate all the children in the region.

There was an oracle in the Old Testament attributed to Balaam in Numbers 24: 17 -19). "A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel...Edom shall be dispossessed". After reading the oracle of Balaam, Herod might have sensed his ultimate end. But, surprisingly, even the Persian Magi knew about the oracle.

Historians of that time noted the appearance of a strange star in the sky. Usually stars move from east to west, but this particular star moved from north to south. Even scientists speculate that there could have been a different and bright star appearing at that time. But the fathers of the church like John Chrysostom conclude that the star might be an angel of God.

What would be the message of the story of the Magi? 'God might have extended the joy to the whole world and the world responded with celebration and worship' – says Scott Hahn in his book 'Joy to the World'. The three things brought by the Magi are also symbolic. They were gold, myrrh and frankincense. They were used in the context of worship. Gold signifies the royal nature of the child, Myrrh symbolizes the healing nature of Jesus and the Incense refers to the priestly function of Jesus. He is the king, priest and healer of the souls.



9. Anna and Simeon

Two elderly people were highlighted in a special way at the presentation of the Lord in the temple. Anna was a widow serving at the premises of the temple and Simeon was an elderly man waiting to see the redemption of Israel before his death. Both were the faithful who knew the scriptures. Both were saints who relied on God alone for the good things that are supposed to come. It is the custom in Asian cultures to receive blessing from the elders. In a special way, the babies and their parents were blessed by the elders of the community.

Traditionally, this event was called purification of the Blessed Mother. It is represented as the ceremony of purification of a mother in Israel after child-birth. The connotations of purification do not fit for the Blessed Mother. She conceived the child by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the presentation of the Lord. It is the consecration of a child to the Lord. Though the parents of Jesus followed the customs of the temple, they knew better that it was in truth a presentation. The words of these two elderly people confirm the reality of consecration. Anna welcomed the Messiah and rejoiced at the restoration that takes place in Israel. She was presented as a prophet (Luke 2: 31-32). Simeon brings the universal dimension of redemption. Jesus is going to be the Savior of the whole universe. He also beautifully links the role of the Blessed Mother in the redemption of the world (Luke 2: 35).



10. Bethlehem

The birth place of great people gain importance these days because they are proof for the historicity, tradition and the make up of that particular person. From the early times, Bethlehem got special attention in the Church and in the world. Even in the middle of the first century people were going to Bethlehem as pilgrims. The Roman Empire did not want that. So they erected a huge temple of Roman Gods in that place. Later, in the time of Constantine, it was destroyed and a new church was built in its place.



Holy Land is an important element in religious thinking. It is the place where God came down to meet human beings. People go there as pilgrims to worship God. Bethlehem is the birth place of David. So people expected the Messiah to be born there. The Infancy Narratives were arranged in such a way to focus our attention on Bethlehem, a tiny village in Palestine. When I first went to Bethlehem as a pilgrim I was humbled by its structure. I had to bend down to worship in the birth place of Jesus. I was so proud of being in the place Jesus was born, not because of its historicity, but because of its symbolic relevance. There are so many religious groups who fight among themselves to own that particular place. I could see divine benevolence and human divisions facing each other in that place.

Each Christmas, we bring Bethlehem into our Churches. The Christmas manger decorated with the figures of Christmas is Bethlehem for us. The same feeling of being in the birth place of Jesus has to be brought into every Church. Priests bless the Christmas manger in a special way during the Christmas celebration. People kneel and pray before the crib. We keep it in the Church until the feast of Epiphany. It is important to value the reality of Christmas that is manifested in this symbol of the manger.

11. Travels of the Holy Family

Christmas is a time for family. To see family members and to enjoy the feast, people travel miles. It is nice to reflect on the travels of the Holy Family at this time. First, Mary traveled alone from Nazareth to the hill country to visit Elizabeth. She went to share her good news with her close cousin and help her in her need. The greeting of Elizabeth and the Song of Mary are beautifully stated in the Gospel of Luke. There could not have been a better visit than this. They shared the goodness of God joyfully and gratefully. The second journey would be the return of Mary to Nazareth with all her sweet thoughts. The third is that of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. This was a difficult trip. They had to search for a place to stay. Finally they ended up in a manger. Next, travel was to Jerusalem for the sacred rites of purification and consecration. Then they travelled to Egypt to escape from King Herod. They might have gone and stayed with some well known people, since Egypt was like New York City where one could find a lot of foreigners staying and working. The last of their travels were from Egypt to Nazareth after the death of Herod.

In all of their travels, the last one, to Egypt was worth reflection. It resembles the great event of the Israeli people, the Exodus event. Joseph of the Old Testament was sold to Egyptian travelers by his own brothers. By the grace of God, he became an important man in the Egyptian kingdom and helped Jacob's family during the time of famine. Later, Jacob's family multiplied as a tribe and was enslaved by Egyptians to do hard work. Under the leadership of Moses, they were brought back to the land of milk and honey by the powerful hand of God. It was not mere history of the Israel people, it was the root memory and constitutive element of Israel life. They celebrated it every year as the Pascal feast and regained their religious identity. Jesus as a child goes through this experience. 'Out of Egypt,

have I called my Son' is the famous Old Testament Oracle that is quoted by Matthew in this context. Jesus is the New Moses. He brings new liberation, a new law and a new way of life to humanity. That is the symbolic meaning of this event. Moreover, Babylon and Egypt were considered symbols of the darkness of the world. Jesus is bringing people from darkness to light. That is the cosmic symbolism expressed by the Fathers of the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church confirms this in the following way: "The flight into Egypt and the massacre of the innocents make manifest the opposition of darkness to the light... Christ's whole life was lived under the sign of persecution. His own share it with him" (CCC 530).

Biblical events and characters reveal one important thing. God comes to us in ordinary life. Sharing His love with creatures is the nature of God. God is a person of love and joy. He makes use of history as a means of His loving communion. He wanted to share His divinity with humanity. His way of communicating his love is wonderful.



II. Theology of Christmas

Many wonder at the word 'theology'. It is a faith-seeking understanding –says St. Anselm. We attempt to understand our faith revealed to us in the Bible and in the traditions of the Church. It is a systematic study with logical principles. The language of religion is a mixture of symbolic languages and historical stories. Theology is the one that gives reasonable thought to Religion. In this event of the birth of Jesus, we see a mix of so many elements like history, mythology, traditions and symbols. They were the normal way of expression in the ancient world. Any reasonable mind tries to understand the core of the revelation of God in human life.

No one can understand the mind of God fully. We are all limited beings. Unless God reveals himself to us, all searches are in vain. God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. God has raised Him from death and proved His supernatural power. Death and Resurrection of Jesus is the starting point of any theology. Only at the resurrection of Jesus, were the eyes of the disciples opened. An awakening of the power of God became definite in the disciples of Jesus.

After the experience of the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples reflected back on the life and ministry. They related all the events of the past. His preaching, His miracles, His extra ordinary power in dealing with the problems of the world and His planning of ministry that extends to the end of time were seen with wonder. Then, in the later period of the first century, they went back to the events that happened at His birth. They saw the miracle of His death and resurrection extended even to His birth.

The Word made flesh

The Word made flesh and dwelt among us – That is the wonder of John in the beginning of the gospel. We have seen His glory, the glory revealed by the Father – that is the witness of John. How is 'The Word of God' made flesh? The disciples of Jesus went to Bethlehem, Nazareth and the hill country of Judea to collect stories, information and witnesses. Mary, the mother of Jesus might have been a great source. The cousins and relatives of Jesus might have been encountered to get the facts. Who is Jesus and from which family did He come? That was the reason for them to go to genealogy. Jesus is from a royal family and His ancestors were specially chosen by God and prepared for this great intervention of God in history. Jesus is the Son of God. God Himself came and dwelt with us. That is the message of different genealogies.

The Expected Messiah

As we know from the Infancy Narratives, there were so many people who projected themselves as Messiahs in the time of Jesus. These aspirations of the people showed how they were in need of God to come in human life. That was the proper time, Kairos of God's intervention. Not only Israeli people, the whole world expected Him at that time. In that way, the birth of Jesus became timeless, eternal. Jesus became the center of time. The time of darkness had gone. Time of evil dominations had gone. A new time, a time of grace and love emerged at the birth of Jesus.

Sharing of Divinity

The highest thing a human person expects from his life is life without end, a life that surpasses death and decay. God, the creator of the universe came to share His Divine Life with human beings. God is a total bond of relationships. He wanted to do something out of His nature, so He

created the universe. The whole universe is a bundle of relationships. Sun, moon, stars, nature and life exist for one another. God goes further to extend His relationship with His creatures. He wants to share His divinity with creatures. That is the reason for His incarnation as a human person. This is not only a wonder that adds a particular character to human life. This is Christmas.

A Drama of Trinity

At the time of the birth of Jesus, the doctrine of Trinity had not been developed systematically. People know the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God. Even in the creation, the Holy Spirit played an important part. Genesis says 'A wind from God swept over the face of the waters' (Gen 1: 2). The Spirit of God was in the enthusiasm of the prophets. Jesus himself quoted the prophet Isaiah when he started his ministry at the synagogue and identified himself as a prophet. The role of the Holy Spirit in the event of the incarnation of Jesus is evident. Virgin Mary conceived the Son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the super extraordinary event that happened in human history.

In the reality of The Word made Flesh, John the evangelist speaks about the second person of the trinity, Jesus. The Word was with God and the Word was God. Through him all were created. In the Infancy Narratives, we see how the evangelists establish the reality of the Son of God. From the event of incarnation only the concept of 'Father' takes a new shape. When Jesus called God 'Father', the scholars and the law experts were scandalized. How can He call God 'Father'? There is a great interaction of Father, Son and the Holy Spirit in the incarnation event. This event only gives a concrete witness to the development of the doctrine 'Holy Trinity' in the later times.

Glimpses of Resurrection

In the early life of the church, the resurrection of Jesus was a break through event. The disciples of Jesus never thought that it would happen. They were shocked by this event. They were speechless in the beginning. The Lord who died before our eyes is raised from death. How could this happen? That shock only made them realize the power of God in human life. They first saw Jesus as the son of God in the resurrection. Then went back to the events of His ministry. Gradually, as they reflected on the events that happened in His life it revealed Him as Son of God. They went back to His baptism at Jordon. That reflection led them to go to the history of His birth. This is the theological process.

The annunciation, the visitation, the birth of Jesus and the presentation in the temple have to be reflected from the point of view of resurrection. Christmas joy has to be understood in the context of suffering and joy, fear and courage, vanity and authenticity, sin and holiness, expectation and fulfillment and finally death and resurrection. Even in the event of the annunciation there was fear, dying to self and bothering about the perspective of the world. However, by the very yes to God, Blessed Mother overcame that. The grace of God was active in her life. During the visitation, we understand the travel of the Blessed Mother to meet her cousin. It clarified the things that happened in her life and finally glorified God for His wonders. At the birth of Jesus, we see the struggles of the Holy Family. Blessed Mother was travelling as a pregnant woman, finding no place at the inn and making an ugly manger into the holiest place in the world. The gifts brought by the Wise men also have a symbolic connotation of the death of Jesus. Myrrh is used on the dead bodies during the burial. The death of innocent children also explains the death and resurrection of Jesus. The first martyrs symbolize the martyrs of different ages. In the presentation event, Simeon speaks about the sword that pierces the heart of the mother. From the perspective of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christmas event gains greater value

Fascinating Faith

The nature of faith invoked in the Christmas event is worth reflecting upon. Salvation is a pure gift from God. It is the initiative of God out of love for humanity. God's love makes a breakthrough in the events of Christmas. A virgin conceives a child; a just man is asked to accept that Divine Child as foster father; the shepherds heard the good news as the first audience; the wise men follow the guidance of the star. This means, some innocent people accept the revelation. They do not question the work of God; their reason tells them that the power of God is more authentic than human wisdom. That is the nature of faith revealed in Christmas events. It is the acceptance of the love of God; it is the wonder of God's power in human life.

For me, faith is the acceptance of the acceptance; it is the process of learning to learn the wonders of God in human life and it is an act of surrender to the will of God. These three aspects are manifested beautifully in the Infancy Narratives. God's acceptance of human beings in His divine life, God's initiative in the process of salvation and human surrender to God with freedom and are seen in all events. Faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who was incarnated and born of the Virgin Mary is the core of Christian faith that developed beautifully in the narratives.

Liturgical Settings

I was amazed at the liturgical settings of the Infancy Narratives. We have angels to sing the Gloria; we have shepherds and wise men to worship the Lord. We have the song of Mary, song of Elizabeth and song of Zechariah. We have the act of the presentation at the temple and the greetings of elders like Simeon and Anna. We have gifts presented to the new born king. We have the word of God spoken; accepted and acted upon. Christmas is a true liturgy of glorifying God for the wonders He has done in human life. It is the celebration, joy and peace to the people who participate in it. All theological elements find their climax in liturgy, the celebration of life. In the Infancy Narrative, life is celebrated, cherished and vibrant. It is the source of creativity in the later ages.

III. Christmas celebration

As I mentioned in the beginning, every Christmas is unique. It has a power to transform the present time into eternity. Those who encounter Christ are transformed into a new creation. They overcome sinful tendencies; they overcome emptiness and meaninglessness that they experienced in the past. Pope Benedict said once: "Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life, a new horizon and a decisive direction"

(ASS 98, 2006, 217).

This experience happens every Christmas. We become more than what we are. God brings us something that is beyond ourselves. That is the Divine Nature that he shares with us in Christ's birth. He shares with us His joy and His goodness. Our human nature is limited. Our being is limited to a particular space and time. Our dreams and our imagination may lead us sometimes beyond ourselves. But the actualization is limited. The feeling of limitedness leads us to frustration and disappointment. In Christmas we find the source of authentic fulfillment. God takes us to new heights and new horizons.

The real newness in Christmas is the newness which God Himself mysteriously brings about and inspires, provokes, guides, and accompanies in thousands of ways. We seek fulfillment in so many things, but find it truly in God. We see happiness in so many things, but find it in the love He shares with us. There is an internal impulse which encourages us, motivates us, nourishes us and gives meaning to all our activities. That is the Spirit of God. We need not seek for anything outside of ourselves. Everything we need is within us. We are created in a unique way, moreover; we participate in the divine nature in a new way. The word of God is constantly striving to embody us in a new way. Joy and growth are the two criterion of spirituality that manifests itself at Christmas.

Joy



We sing 'Joy to the World' on Christmas day. The shepherds found great joy in the message of the angels. What would be their joy? It is an interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual lives and community activities. It takes away all pessimism, fatalism and mistrust. Each day in our world beauty is born anew. Each moment is the climax of life and each event in life is an opportunity to shape our life. This joy is not something we achieve. It is given to us by God Himself. Those who encounter Jesus receive this joy in their heart.

Growth

Growth in every aspect of life is another sign that is seen in Christmas. Our world is growing toward goodness. Our world is growing into the Kingdom of God. Values of life are enriched, progress of the people increases and new opportunities for life emerge in every situation of life. The concept of time in Christianity is linear. It is moving toward perfection. Some people may say that the world is going backward. A Christian cannot believe this. God is making the world new every day. We become a new creation. New scientific discoveries, new possibilities of living, new medicines are evident. They are the work of God. Even though many scientists are not believers, they wonder at the growth of energy in human life. They know well, it is not mere achievements of individuals. There is a collective force in every development. This is the work of God. He brings good out of evil; the Kingdom of God is growing like a mustard seed in the world, though it is not evident to the eyes of many.

Celebrating in symbols

The word symbol is the combination of two Greek words, *sum* and *bullein*. They connect two different realities. Those who use these symbols in a meaningful way experience the connection. The power of symbols is enormous. They unite people for a particular purpose. They play a great part in the celebrations. Christmas symbols are more dynamic and vivid. The hidden realities under these symbols have to be discovered each year in each community. I would like to share five Christmas symbols here.

1. Christmas tree

The tradition of the Christmas tree started in Germany. From the year 1570, there is evidence of Christmas. These are different legends about this tradition. Catholics attribute it to St. Boniface who evangelized Germany. Protestants say that it is started with Martin Luther. What is important is the symbolic meaning. It represents the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. Jesus is the tree of life. Even in winter the Christmas tree is green and fascinating. Jesus is the evergreen tree.



There is also a beautiful story about the tree. In Germany, a little boy knocked at the door of a particular family who was celebrating Christmas at home on a cold winter night. That boy was homeless. The family welcomed him in their home and made a bed for him and shared their Christmas gifts with him. The next morning the boy went out and brought a tree and placed it in the house and disappeared. They considered him as Jesus and they started the traditions of the Christmas tree and sharing gifts with the poor. In Asian traditions, a tree is a powerful symbol of life. People go and embrace trees to get energy and strength. They consider them as symbols of divine nature. Jesus is the tree of life. Let him inspire us to share life with others.

2. Christmas Manger

Saint Francis of Assisi was the first one who started the tradition of the Christmas Manger. He first organized a live Christmas manger with real people and animals. He wanted to point out the wonder



of Christmas. Christmas is a cosmic feast. Jesus brings harmony between people, animals and all the realities of the universe. The harmony that was in the Garden of Eden in the beginning of creation was lost by the sin of Adam. Jesus is the new Adam who recovers the lost harmony. That is the meaning of the Christmas Manger.

People all over the world started to create Christmas mangers in creative ways all through the centuries. There are both live and symbolic mangers. In every Catholic Church, the manger plays an important role in the devotional life of the people. Families arrange one in their home. Peace, unity and joy are the values that are cherished in Christmas mangers. The Prophet Isaiah (11: 1-10) speaks about this cosmic harmony. Jesus is the son of David who establishes this harmony by removing sin from the world. Creative ways are encouraged by the Church by displaying a Christmas manger. At the Vatican every year a new type of manger is made. There is also a special blessing of the Christmas manger in the Church.

3. Santa

Santa Claus is another well known participant in Christmas celebrations. The idea of Santa originally came from the life of St. Nicholas whose feast is celebrated on December 6th in the Church liturgy. St. Nicholas lived in the fourth century. He was a



charitable man from his early life. A famous story of St. Nicholas throwing golden coins at the window of a poor family anonymously at night

for the arrangements of marriage for the three daughters in the house is a well known one. St. Nicholas was made bishop in his local city because of his generosity and faith. He defended the divine and human nature of Jesus at the Council of the Ephesus against Arianism, which insisted that God can never become human.

Santa is a symbol developed in different ways over the centuries through multiple stories. Giving gifts is the unique character that is emphasized in this celebration. It reveals the love and concern of society for children. Christmas candy is another symbol of Christmas distributed by Santa in the celebration. Red miter is another symbol attached to this custom. In everything the Christmas meaning has to be manifested. God who became human is with us in creative ways. It is the joy that makes us celebrate

4. Christmas Carols

The word *carol* or *carole* is a medieval word of French and Anglo-Norman origin believed to mean a dance song or a circle dance accompanied by singing. Broadly defined, carols express religious joy and are often associated with the Christmas season. It is unclear when the first carol was written but it is believed that circa 1350 to 1550 is the golden age of English carols and most of the carols followed the verse-refrain pattern. During the 14th century, carols became a popular religious song form. The theme often revolved around a saint, the Christ child or the Virgin Mary, at times blending two languages such as English and Latin.



The song 'Silent Night' must be included as a Christmas Carol. Over the years the music for this well known Christmas song has been erroneously attributed to plenty of famous composers, including Haydn and Beethoven.

But the true lyricist was unknown until as recently as 1995, when an 1820 manuscript was discovered that confirmed the men behind the song. The song was actually written by two Austrians: one named Franz Xaver Gruber, a primary school teacher, and the other was Joseph Mohr, an assistant pastor at St. Nicholas Church in Salzburg. In 1816, Gruber started as choirmaster and organist at the church when he quickly decided to compose a new hymn for the congregation to sing. The two created *Stille Nacht*. It was picked up by two popular traveling families of folk singers around 1931, the Strassers and the Rainers, after which it began gaining in popularity.

Singing carols reveals harmony and joy brought by Jesus into the world. First, it was sung in the context of the Christmas Mass. Later it became a concert. Our Church choir and their contributions to liturgical music should be recognized, appreciated and developed in a special way at this very special time.



5. Christmas Mass

The culmination of Christmas is the Holy Mass. During Mass the incarnation of Jesus is taking place in reality. Every Mass is the actualization of the salvation brought by Jesus to the world. Christmas Mass is the one that actualizes the reality and the joy of the Lord in the community. The mystery of Christmas is tangibly experienced in the Holy Mass. The decorations in the church, the lights at the altar, the reading of the event of Christmas, songs and Eucharistic Communion are celebrated in a harmonious way in the Holy Mass. It is a sacred art developed wonderfully for the last two thousand years.



6. Christmas Dinner

Eating together at home on Christmas is another sacred act. Everyone wishes Merry Christmas and shares Christmas gifts and celebrates happily with a special meal. It is another dimension of the Holy Eucharist celebrated at the Church. Christmas stories at home are different, more dynamic, creative and joyful. The joy of Christmas is manifested fully in a concrete way at home!



Enjoy an Evergreen Christmas!

There are several creative ways in which God is coming to meet us. God wants us to be creative in receiving him. God takes the initiative. Human response counts very much. Our response could be biblical, reading scriptures and understanding the ways of God. It could be theological, reflecting on the mystery of Incarnation. It could be practical, celebrating, sharing and having fun with our loved ones. All these things bring meaning to our lives. More than that, as a Church community, we could share our joy in a profound way. The best way is to greet others with the words 'Merry Christmas'. It is not a mere holiday season, amusing ourselves with many events. It is a feast of sharing divinity with one another. In our parish, no one should be a stranger, no one should be individualistic and no one should be left out. A faith filled relationship is the fruit of Christmas.

Children play a major role in the Christmas celebrations. Their smiles express the joy of the new born baby Jesus. Their gestures reveal the dance of the angels. Their words of love manifest the Word of God that comes to us everyday. Their longings and dreams for life reveal the plan of God in our lives. Let us celebrate Christmas with children. Another group that is similar to children includes the elderly in our community. They are wonders in our lives. Their experiences in life, their positive attitudes and their hopes are treasures of life. Let us share their joy also.



I wish you a Merry Christmas.

**May the divine light break through your life in a
surprising and wonderful way.**

**May the grace that filled the Blessed Mother fill your
hearts with gentleness.**

**May the new-born Divine Child bring real joy and beau-
ty to our world.**

