

Third Sunday of Advent Year A

In today's Gospel John the Baptist, who is in prison, sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him, 'are you the one who is to come, or do we have to wait for someone else'. In reply Jesus says something very interesting: He says, 'go back and tell John what you see and hear'. He doesn't give a long speech to prove he is the messiah – he just says, 'see and hear'.

And that is very significant. Our faith is deepened not only by words but also by what we see and hear. And that's why at Christmas time we not only tell the story of Jesus' birth, but we have a great tradition of recreating the scene of his birth in a visual way, through building a crib – a nativity scene that helps to bring alive the birth of our Saviour in our hearts and minds.

Some years ago, Pope Francis wrote a beautiful letter on the meaning and importance of the Nativity Scene. I would like to share just a few sentences from that letter. This is what the Pope says:

The enchanting image of the Christmas crib, so dear to the Christian people, never ceases to arouse amazement and wonder. ...The nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of sacred Scripture. As we contemplate the Christmas scene, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey. We come to realize that so great is God's love for us that he became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him.

With this Letter, (the Pope says) I wish to encourage the beautiful family tradition of preparing the nativity scene in the days before Christmas, but also the custom of setting it up in the workplace, in schools, hospitals, prisons and town squares. ... It is my hope that this custom will never be lost and that, wherever it has fallen into disuse, it can be rediscovered and revived.

The origin of the Christmas crib is found above all in certain details of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, as related in the Gospels. The evangelist Luke says simply that Mary "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (2:7). Coming into this world, the Son of God was laid in a manger, the place where animals feed. Hay became the first bed of the One who would reveal himself as "the bread come down from heaven" (Jn 6:41).

(In the crib) we also find the figures of Mary and Joseph. Mary is a mother who contemplates her child and shows him to every visitor.

(This is a beautiful image of Mary – she isn't clinging to her baby, letting no-one see him. No, she shows him to everyone – to the shepherds, the wise men, even the animals – and she shows her baby to each one of us also.)

At Mary's side, shown protecting the Child and his Mother, stands Saint Joseph. He is usually depicted with staff in hand or holding up a lamp. Saint Joseph plays an important role in the life of Jesus and Mary. He is the guardian who tirelessly protects his family.

(He is also our protector and guardian. He watches over you and me, and the whole Church, just as he watches over Mary and Jesus.)

A most beautiful preparation for Christmas is to come very close to a nativity scene – preferably one that is large – and gaze upon it – allow it to speak to you in a way that words cannot; feel the wonder and the marvellous mystery of the Incarnation, and in your heart enter the scene. Stand beside Joseph, say hello to Mary, smell the animals, worship the new born child with the wise men. Allow your faith to deepen.

Fr Michael Goonan SSP

Projectionist: Please display this scene during the homily

