



THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL

(JOHN 1:1-18)

The stories on which we have been reflecting over the past few weeks from the accounts of Matthew and Luke focus on the conception and birth of the Son of God.

The writer of the Fourth Gospel, whom we usually call 'John', begins his presentation of Jesus and his message with a profound reflection on the mystery of the Word which existed with God from the very beginning and took flesh as a human being in the person of Jesus. The Evangelist expressed this as 'pitching his tent among us'. But why? Jesus is God's Word, God's invitation to human beings to accept their true nature as children of God. This is an offer, not a demand. Throughout Israel's history, God reached out to the people, offering a covenant, a relationship of sharing life and love, not for any merit on their part, but simply out of God's free choice. When the people fell short in their living out of the covenant, God always offered the chance of being forgiven and renewing the bond.

In the person of Jesus, we see God's ultimate offer of such a relationship: not one of duty or obligation, but a free response on our part to what God has done for us in reaching out in this way. God is presenting us with a gift: it is up to us to accept or refuse it on an ongoing basis, not just once and for all. ■

LEARN

There is no infancy narrative, no story of the conception and birth of Jesus, in the Gospel according to John.

Jesus as the Word of God corresponds to the female figure of Wisdom in the Jewish Hebrew and Greek Scriptures.

The Feast of Christmas replaced the pagan Roman festival of Saturnalia: that is why it is celebrated in December.

SAY

Thank you, God, for the gift of your Word to me.

DO

As you unwrap your present, think of the person who gave it to you and their reason for doing so. Then remember Jesus in the crib as God's present to you and God's reason for sending you this gift.



REFLECT

Christmas is very much a time for giving presents. Most homes have a tree under which the brightly-wrapped gifts are laid awaiting the excitement of being opened on Christmas Day. Gifts are important, not necessarily because of what they are but because of what they mean. If we suspect that someone is giving us a present out of a sense of obligation, then the object itself will not be of much interest to us. But if we realise that something, maybe apparently of little objective value, is an expression of love and affection, then it is something we are likely to treasure for a long time.

Today, we celebrate God's greatest gift to us, that of God's love in the person of Jesus. This is not a gift that we are supposed to put away safely in a cupboard and bring out every Christmas and Easter, but one which should be part of our daily life, a gift that we refer to as our faith. The old Catechism described faith as "a response to revelation": at the feast of the Nativity (the birth) of the Lord, we are again presented with God's clearest statement of the Word, and we are invited to respond once more as grateful disciples of Jesus.

Our faith is not something static, a set of statements which we recite in the Creed: it is a living, developing relationship with the Lord. If we think of it as a gift, it is more like a plant than a picture. Or, we might think of it as a Russian doll: each time we open it, there is another one inside, but we have to open it to discover the next layer. As we look at the Christmas crib scene, we might remember that we are being invited to become part of the mystery which we contemplate. ■

First Reading**Is 9:1-6**

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing, as they rejoice before you as at the harvest, as people make merry when dividing spoils. For the yoke that burdened them, the pole on their shoulder, and the rod of their taskmaster you have smashed, as on the day of Midian. For every boot that tramped in battle, every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for flames. For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this!

Responsorial Psalm**Ps 96****Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.**

Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all you lands.
Sing to the LORD; bless his name.

Announce his salvation, day after day.
Tell his glory among the nations;
among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.

Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice;
let the sea and what fills it resound;
let the plains be joyful and all that is in them!
Then shall all the trees of the forest exult.

They shall exult before the LORD, for he comes;
for he comes to rule the earth.
He shall rule the world with justice
and the peoples with his constancy.

Second Reading**Ti 2:11-14**

Beloved: The grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself

for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good.

Gospel**Lk 2:1-14**

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled 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 her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."