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## Christmas Day - A Family Celebration: 25<sup>th</sup> December 2020

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We meet to celebrate the coming of Christ into the world: **Allelujah!**  
The word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you;  
**and also with you.**

Hear the words of the angel to Joseph:  
'you shall call his name Jesus,  
for he will save his people from their sins'.  
Therefore let us seek the forgiveness of God  
through Jesus the Saviour of the world.

We confess our unworthiness to stand in your presence as your children.

**Forgive us and heal us.**

The Virgin Mary accepted your call to be the mother of Jesus,  
forgive our disobedience to your call.

**Forgive us and heal us.**

Your Son our Saviour was born in poverty in a manger.  
Forgive our greed and rejection of your ways.

**Forgive us and heal us.**

The shepherds left their flocks to go to Bethlehem.  
Forgive our self-interest and lack of vision.

**Forgive us and heal us.**

The wise men followed the star to find Jesus the King.  
Forgive our reluctance to seek you.

**Forgive us and heal us.**

### **Absolution**

Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy on you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness, and keep you in eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Isaiah 9:2-7**

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.  
You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest.  
For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor,  
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onwards and for evermore.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

This is the word of the Lord;

**Thanks be to God.**

A reflective hymn

## **Luke 2:1-14** [The Birth of Jesus]

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

This is the Gospel of the Lord

**Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ**

## **Sermon**

In the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

That gospel reading is told simply, in story form. You could be forgiven for just seeing it as a story about the birth of a little baby. But it's much more than that - its a story of the frankly difficult-to-believe event: of the coming of the Son of God into our world. And I have to confess that I believe it.

I've tried not to - I've poked around most of the Books of the Bible to find the fatal weak points of the message that God actually came into our space and time. That he came to try to change how we live our lives. How we treat each other; how we spread God's message of love rather than hate; of care for each other rather than exploitation; of faith in God, in a society which finds it a bit irrelevant.

But try not to take this narrative as though it was written down at the time of the birth of Jesus. It isn't a breathless reporter, notebook in hand, telling the story as it unfolded. But if it isn't reportage, we have a set of big questions of the "why, what, where, when" type. Like all of the gospel stories, they are written in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, not in the light of his birth. That event - Jesus' death and resurrection - is still 33 years or so in the future. So it has to have been written after the fact. Luke wrote this gospel in about 85 AD. Luke's purpose was to present an account of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus. And it was written for converts to this new religion: people who lived in the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean. People for whom kings and emperors were treated rather like gods. They were accustomed to incredible happenings - un-natural happenings - portents in the sky and the stars - that they interpreted differently to the way we do nowadays.

So we have a story which is designed to convince people that this event of the birth of Jesus would transform their lives for ever. Written at such a time-lag (of up to 85 years) it is not terribly surprising that some of the historical figures that are trailed in the narrative are mildly inaccurate! "When Quirinius was governor of Syria": Quirinius was a real historical figure. But he was appointed legate of Syria in 6AD. He was given the special task of restructuring Judea as a Roman province.

So surely, he came well after Jesus' birth. After all, scholars are more likely to place Jesus' birth even earlier than our standard of 0 AD, certainly not after.

"All went to their own towns to be registered": that may have happened, but there is no historical evidence for such a disruptive practice.

"She gave birth to her first-born son, and wrapped him in bands of cloth" is how our modern translation puts it (if we remember our King James version of the story, it was in "swaddling clothes". That term comes from one of the deuterocanonical books - Wisdom - "I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths".

I'm trying to point out that this whole series of readings is immersed in the world of Judaism. It is speaking to the earliest Christians, many of whom were Jewish, in language they could comprehend. And the language is both poetic and philosophical. In the reading from Isaiah we have concepts bandied about in an effort to

convince people that a righteous king would appear; “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” - the imagery of replacing darkness with light. And the concept of an oppressed nation being freed from the bar across their shoulders is used to promise a sacred victory - a victory of power from a Wonderful Counsellor, a mighty God, an everlasting Father, a Prince of Peace - all the good aspects that we could ever hope for in how our lives are ordered.

It’s all about that basic Israelite yearning – that human urge to hope. Hope that everything will be all right; will be better. That justice, fairness, love and happiness will prevail. Isn't that what we also want, today in this sophisticated modern country of Ireland - justice, fairness, love, happiness? It really all comes down to our yearning for good government; for good relations between us all; for fairness and equity; that - “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

If we take that seriously – if we try even sometimes to treat our fellow human beings as God asks us to do, we come closer to living this Gospel; we come closer to the gospel reading of this holy day; we come closer to entering into this mystery of the incarnation – the coming into human form – of the Son of God. It is such a transformative message that little things in the text such as exactly when Quirinius was appointed to Syria are absolutely irrelevant. Because the point of the narrative is to convince us to open our eyes and our souls to the transformative, life-changing events that took place in Palestine 2,000-odd years ago.

Why else do you come into a Christian church on this festival day? Why? Because you take sustenance from the message that Luke wrote down so long ago.

“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all”.

That's the kernel of today – the grace of God has appeared. Thank God.

So go from here and share your love with your families and friends on this superlative festival day. This day when we commemorate the birth of the Son of God. I wish you all a very happy Christmas. Love each other, as Christ loves us.

Amen.

### **The Apostles’ Creed**

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord.

who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

born of the Virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, died and was buried;

he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;

he ascended into heaven,

he is seated at the right hand of the Father,

and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church,

the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

**Amen.**

### **The Collect of the Nativity of our Lord**

Almighty God,

You have given us your only-begotten Son

to take our nature upon him,

and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin;

Grant that we, who have been born again

and made your children by adoption and grace,

may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

### **Prayers of intercession**

Teach your faithful people to learn the message of salvation;  
to treasure it, and to ponder it in their hearts.

*Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer***

Give peace to the world; peace between nations and races; peace where people are in dispute; peace and comfort to those suffering hunger and famine. May the love of the Holy Family of Bethlehem draw all into the way that leads to eternal life. At this period of historic change and disruption between our nations, we pray that harmony will remain and draw us all together.

***hear our prayer***

Grant us the light of faith given to the shepherds, that we may make known the wonder of the Nativity. As we rejoice at this time with our families and friends, make us truly grateful for the wonderful gift of the Holy Child.

***hear our prayer***

Have mercy on all who are sad and lonely at this time; the sick; the injured; the bereaved and those who are near to death. Be with those who are ill with COVID, in nursing homes, in hospitals around this country; those isolated in intensive care units. We thank God for their carers. We remember the family members who are living through this uncertain time.

***hear our prayer***

We pray for those who in this world gave thanks for the birth of their Lord and have passed through death to be born to eternal life in him. May our worship this day be found with theirs.

***hear our prayer***

We offer our prayers through Christ as we intercede to our Saviour.

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name;

thy kingdom come,

thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,

the power and the glory,

for ever and ever, **Amen.**

When the Word became flesh, earth was joined to heaven in the womb of Mary;  
may the love and obedience of Mary be your example.

May the peace of Christ rule in your hearts and homes.

May you be filled with the joy of the Spirit and the gifts of your eternal home.

And the blessing of God almighty,

the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

be with you and remain with you always.

**Amen.**