

“Love was Born at Christmas!”

It's in the air tonight and we can feel it. We are standing on the edge of Christmas Day. All our preparations are almost coming to an end and now the celebration begins. On this beautiful night, we celebrate the birth of Jesus once again. Throughout the season of Advent, we have lifted the words of the prophet Isaiah and the gospel writer Luke, who narrated the story of Mary and Elizabeth. Now we have arrived at Bethlehem to celebrate this wondrous birth!

Ask any mom or dad or grandparent about the birth of a new baby, and they can describe the event in great detail. From labour pains to the birth of the baby, the stories never cease to amaze us! Birth stories are often extremely powerful. They can immediately bring us back to a joyous moment. Sometimes they can sadly remind us of some couple's struggles with health issues, or they can even stir our imaginations of children hoped for. Other times, the birth stories can make us aware of the difficult circumstances some couples have to overcome in their lives. Like most birth stories, the storyteller sets the stage. They describe the setting and the situation in which the child was born. They bring us into the realities of the event. The Gospel storytellers Matthew and Luke, who wrote the birth stories of Jesus, tell us that the birth of Jesus is a joyous and mysterious event. But have we thought of the questions – why are we celebrating Christmas and is Christmas still relevant for us today?

It was in the year 336 CE, during the reign of Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, that the first recorded date of Christmas being celebrated on December 25th took place. A few years later, Pope Julius I officially declared that the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on the 25th December that would make this year its 1687th celebration. Like any other tradition, Christmas has evolved in many different ways, in almost all countries in the world. The way we celebrate Christmas has changed over and over again.

Did you know that the observance of Christmas was illegal in Boston in 1659 and that there was even a time under Cromwell when the Puritans banned the celebration of Christmas in England? Did you know that Christmas was pronounced as Christ-Mass for hundreds of years before it became Christmas? Did you know that Christianity's fascination with the nativity story,

known also as the Christmas pageant, didn't actually happen when Christianity began? In the 13th century, St. Francis of Assisi couldn't fit his congregation into the church building on Christmas Eve and came up with the brilliant idea of holding the Christ-mass in the streets. St. Francis set up an altar in the niche of a rock near the town square and legend has it that, because Christ-mass was an important market the town was full of all sorts of farmers bringing their livestock to market. That's how the cattle, the sheep, and yes, even the donkey made it into the nativity scenes. The gospels certainly didn't mention animals.

The gospel storytellers Matthew and Luke crafted their stories about the birth of Jesus in their own unique way. Matthew, for instance, started the birth narrative with genealogies, focused more on Joseph and had the magi visit the infant Jesus. Luke, on the other hand, began his story with a census, focused more on Mary and had the angels visiting the shepherds. These were the images that brought inspiration to their own communities. And what we in the churches did was to put the two stories of Matthew and Luke together and voilà! We have a full nativity story. But does it matter? Oh, just in case you are wondering, there is no birth narrative in the Gospel of Mark and John.

I don't know about you, but I certainly do not take the birth stories of Jesus literally. I understand that these stories are what the NT scholar John Dominic Crossan call "parabolic overtures" designed to communicate truth beyond words. The stories of Jesus' birth, according to Matthew and Luke, are parables designed to make us think beyond words. When the angel announced to Mary that she would bear a child, what did that mean to our faith? When the angels pronounce to the shepherds, "fear not!", what does that mean as we address our own fears? When Joseph was visited by an angel in a dream, what did that have to do with our hopes and visions for the future? If we take the birth story as a story of truth, not a historical fact, will it diminish our faith or make us a lesser Christian? My answer was a resounding "no"! For me, the stories of the birth of Jesus, just like any birth story of a child, is the birthing of love.

"It is the incarnation of LOVE", according to theologian Richard Rohr, "that lies at the very heart of all that is!" And Rohr continues... The incarnation of LOVE that the nativity parables

point to is the same LOVE that was encountered in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In this radical, freethinking, boundary-breaking, justice-seeking, peacemaker, wound-healing individual, the people discovered the image of God who is LOVE in ways that shattered their understanding of reality... That's why the Christmas story has become such an important parable in our annual celebrations of life. Everything about the nativity points us to the reality of the spiritual in the everyday stuff of life. In the simple birth of a child, in the poverty of a people, in the struggle to be free, in our quest to love and to be loved in the world, it is here that Christ takes on flesh and dwells among us. Wherever we are connected in the right relationship, you might say, wherever we are "in love" there is Christ, the body of God, the essence of life itself.

Friends, to celebrate Christmas is to celebrate LOVE that is born over and over again. It is to recognize the intimate connection between the spiritual and the material and to marvel at the reality that holds it all together. To celebrate Christ in the Christ-mass is to open ourselves to the wisdom of the ages and dare to explore the wonders that we are discovering each and every day. So, Christmas Eve is the time for stories about life way back when. But it is also a time to take in the wonders of this very night and to look forward to all that is to come. So, when you encounter the question, "Is Christmas still relevant to us today?" I think the answer is a resounding Yes!

Tonight, the Christmas story reveals to us the meaning of true love that lives and breathes in, with, through, and beyond us. As we pay attention to the manger, a symbol of all our potential lying there ready to grow, we can begin again to dream dreams of a new way of being in the world; dreams of joy, compassion, justice, peace, and LOVE. Tonight, we encounter love in the face of an infant. It's unexpected. It's real. It's hopeful beyond any telling of it. Tonight, we see the human face of a loving God through a parable that permeates our mind, body, soul and spirit.

The poet Ann Weems reminds us of the meeting of the human and the holy in the stable. Listen as I read to you her poem entitled: "Christmas Comes"

"Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons.
The human and the holy meet in Bethlehem or in Times Square,
For Christmas comes like a golden storm on its way to Jerusalem –
determinedly, inevitably...
Even now it comes in the face of hatred and warring –

No atrocity too terrible to stop it,
No Herod strong enough,
No hurt deep enough, no disaster shattering enough.
For someone on earth will see the star,
Someone will hear the angel voices,
Someone will run to Bethlehem,
Someone will know peace and goodwill: the Christ will be born!”

As we break bread and share the cup on this holy night, my prayer for each of you is to experience and see the face of Christ as we commit ourselves to loving one another. May the love we celebrate tonight, and every night, might usher in a new way of being. Rejoice and be glad! Love was born at Christmas! Amen.