

20141224ChristmasSermon

St Francis was a person who believed that one should live one's life as closely as possible to the life of Christ. This he achieved to such an extent that when death was approaching the stigmata – the wounds of Christ – appeared spontaneously on his own body. In everything he did, he tried to do as Christ would. So three years before he died, as Christmas was approaching he thought of a way of celebrating the birth of Christ. He remembered his visit to Bethlehem and the stable where tradition said Christ had been born. So he decided to re-create this in a cave near the town of Greccio in Italy.

Models of each of the animals and characters from that first Christmas night were made and placed in the cave. Tradition tells us that as Francis and the villagers worshipped at that Cave/stable the model people and animals came to life and re-enacted that first Christmas night. Whether this was true or not is not for us to judge but the true miracle of that night was that a tradition was started where stables and manger scenes began to appear in churches and homes all round the world from that time right until today.

Francis wanted those worshipping at the stable to try and live their lives as Christ – to see that Christ, God incarnate, was in the form of a tiny human baby and see what that meant for them. As we think about it and as we strive to be like Christ in our lives, perhaps we come out more like some of the other characters in that stable scene rather than Jesus.

Perhaps the Ox – the original resident of the stable pushed to one side so that the Holy Family could have room. Perhaps the ox was a bit put out. We've all been in that type of situation. Just when you have everything going for you, suddenly someone else has to be fitted in. Your comfort and security is threatened. Have you noticed that in most manger scenes the oxen is lying down? That seems to me to indicate acceptance of the Baby Jesus into the ox's stable space. Thomas Hardy wrote a famous poem entitled *The Oxen*

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
"Now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come; see the oxen kneel,

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

Now they are all on their knees as we should be regardless of how our comfort is threatened by a stranger in our midst.

Ox to stable

The other animal present in that stable was the one that brought the Holy Family to Bethlehem, the donkey. Donkeys have a bad press; usually portrayed as being stupid and rather stubborn. I always feel an affinity towards donkeys – their faces seem to say that they have the weight of world upon their shoulders. Once again many of us might feel like that as we journey through life. Mocked because of large ears – Chesterton had it right when he wrote:

With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

Yes, those of us who relate ourselves to the Donkey, do have our hour and the pleasure of being in the presence of the saviour in a manger.

Donkey into the stable

Of course, one of the main characters in this entire story is Joseph the spouse of Mary. Told by Mary, his fiancé that she is pregnant, not only pregnant but pregnant from the Holy Spirit and carrying God's son. Surely that would be a good time for him to break off his relationship but then he receives a message from the angel himself. And so he just goes with the flow. I don't know about you but I often feel a bit like Joseph. Things happening in my life so rapidly that decisions have to be made in the moment and only when I look back do I realise just how weird and unreal those situations seem to have been. Yet major decisions were made in those unreal-like moments. So, do you identify with Joseph as you look back at your life?

Joseph into the stable

Then of course there is Mary, mother of our Lord. Some people say that a lot of Mary's character was a creation of the patriarchal church authorities. A pile of unmarried men telling us how they think that women should behave by imitating Mary who without questions says "Be it unto me according to your will"; a woman who does not at any point question and say, "Oi! What's going on here?" but rather just 'ponder them in her heart'. For others, they try to identify with Mary acknowledging that God's ways are not our ways and even if we are frighten and fearful for what the future might hold, we are faithful enough to be willing to leave it to God. So is Mary a patriarchal creation of the church to keep women in their place or a model for us to follow? Perhaps we need to ponder that in our hearts.

Mary into the Stable

The penultimate characters to be placed in our crib scene this evening [morning] are those who like Mary and Joseph, experienced the vision of Angels bringing them a message. In contemporary times it is often pointed out that the first people to go and worship the new-born Christ child were people from the margins of society - the shepherds. [We have just sung about them and their experience in our Gradual Hymn] [we will sing all about those shepherds in our offertory hymn shortly]. They go immediately to the stable and see the thing described to them by Angels. The angels that have called us here this evening/morning were perhaps not really Angels like the Shepherds saw but Boney-M singing those dreadful Christmas songs in Checkers, or maybe the choir of King's college with their wonderful carols Service. Perhaps the angels were our own conscious saying "Go to church and worship the new born Christ child" and this is why you obeyed and you are here. Tradition says that the Shepherds brought gifts of sheep to Jesus. I'm sure you have bought gifts for those special people in your lives this Christmas.

Sheep and shepherd into stable

While researching this sermon I found a poem by Sylvia Sands which describes her setting up of the crib scene in her home, just as we have been doing here tonight/this morning but she feels that there is a character missing, a character that perhaps we can all identify with as we bring our Christmas preparation to there culmination. Let me read the poem to you.

Advent Absentee Sylvia Sands

Here I go again,
carefully unpacking the figures of the crib,
tenderly wiping dust from Mary's eyes
and Joseph's beard,
all the while practising my contemplative skills.

Here I am,
duster in hand,
seeking to emulate
the shepherds' enthusiasm and openness,
(wipe, wipe)
the wise men's courage and generosity,
(dust, dust)
Mary's mysticism,
Joseph's humility,
the Christ Child's vulnerability.

Who am I kidding?

It is the absent figure that haunts me.

I stand shoulder to shoulder
in grim, callous, irritable solidarity
with that wretched innkeeper.

No room, no time, no way.

Nobody has ever dared carve him in wood
and include him in the Christmas crib,
Have they?

“No room, no time, no way” Is this how your Christmas feels right now? Is this the character you identify with the most? How can it be different? By the presence of Jesus, the baby Jesus, in our lives. So let me place him in the crib scene right now and then let us kneel in silence worship and adore the new born king.

Bambino into the stable

Let us pray that God our Father will bless this crib, and that all who worship his Son, born of the Virgin Mary, may come to share his life in glory.

God our Father, on this night [day] your Son Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary for us and for our salvation: bless this crib, which we have prepared to celebrate that holy birth; may all who see it be strengthened in faith and receive the fullness of life he came to bring, who is alive and reigns for ever. Amen.

Christmas morning

To you, O Christ, Word of the Father, we offer our lowly prayers and humble thanks; for love of our human race you most wonderfully chose to be born of Mary, and to take our nature as nevermore to lay it by; so that we might be born again by your Spirit and restored in the image of God; to whom, one blessed Trinity, be given all honour, might, majesty and power, now and for ever. Amen.

Christmas Midnight

O God the Son, highest and holiest, who humbled yourself to share our birth and our death: bring us with the shepherds and the wise men to kneel before your holy cradle, that we may come to sing with your angels your glorious praises in heaven; where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, God, world without end. Amen.

