

Christmas Day

St. Francis of Assisi created the first Christmas manger in the year 1223, exactly 800 years ago. If you have one in your home or visit ours at the cathedral, you have St. Francis to thank. The Christmas crib lets us imagine more clearly the events that took place in Bethlehem long, long ago. We see the poverty of Jesus' birth—how his first bed was a feeding trough reserved for animals. Yet above him we see angels arriving to dignify the day.

To commemorate the birth of Christ this morning, we hear the opening verses of the Letter to the Hebrews, which immediately set out who Jesus is: the Son of God. As God spoke to our ancestors through prophets, so he has spoken to us through his Son. In spite of his simple birth, he is the heir of all things, the refulgence of God's glory. He has taken his seat, no longer next to farm animals, but "at the right hand of the Majesty on high, as far superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs." Any newborn raises tantalizing questions about what that child will become. In the case of Jesus, he became the Lord of heaven and earth. The same angels who heralded his birth worshipped him after his resurrection.

These opening verses from the Letter to the Hebrews fill us also with awe. The coming of Christ revealed the voice of God, the Word, in human flesh. These verses also fill us with hope. One verse says that the Son of God "sustains all things by his mighty word." He came among us in the simplest of circumstances to show that he understands all the things that afflict us—enemies from without, temptations from within. He sustains us by his own mighty word.

Christmas is a feast for the eyes, the ears, the voice and the heart. Throughout the city, we clothe the outside of our buildings with light. We adorn the insides of our homes with trees and stockings. We hear and sing familiar carols. We see members of our families and dearest friends, and we hear from those we cannot see. Those who do not observe Christmas cannot avoid it. Christmas affects our economy, our schedules, our work and our play. Even the NFL has invited the Chiefs to clinch their division on Christmas Day.

All this is fitting because Christ has come for us all. Through him all of this came to be. For those with eyes to see, the Christmas manger tells the story. For those with ears to hear, the mighty word of Christ sustains them through the dark days that pine for light.

As we look to the new year, let us open our hearts to the word that Christ speaks to us, both in the scriptures and directly within our hearts. Let us devote ourselves anew to reading the bible alone and with others. When we do, we will meet the One who sustains us. On the first Christmas Day, the Father sent his Only-Begotten Son into a manger one silent night so that we could listen without disruption to his holy word.

Monday, December 25, 2023