The Christmas Crib

The crib, which adorns churches and homes at Christmas time, is thought to have originated with St Francis at Greccio in Italy in 1123 as a way of teaching people about Jesus. Today the crib continues to be a visual reminder of the Gospel story of Jesus’ birth and a popular way of teaching children about the meaning of Christmas.

A stable in Bethlehem
Jesus was born in ‘the town of David called Bethlehem’ (Lk 2:4). David was a great king in the Jewish ancestry from whom the messiah was expected to descend. Luke’s Gospel is saying that Jesus is the fulfilment of the messianic promise made to the Jewish people.

The Gospel tells us that the circumstances of Jesus’ birth were less than ideal. By Roman law Joseph and Mary had to take part in a census which meant a journey of over 100 km from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, Joseph’s native town. In Bethlehem, despite Mary’s nearness to giving birth, they could not find accommodation. They took shelter in a cave for housing animals. It was there that Mary gave birth.

The central figures
Central to the crib are the figures of Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus.

Mary is a young girl who has conceived through the Holy Spirit and fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah: The virgin will conceive and bear a son, and he will be called Emmanuel which means God-with-us (Mt 1:22; Lk 1:26-38).

Joseph is a descendent of David, a carpenter to whom God appeared in a dream (read Mt 1:18-25).

The baby Jesus is a child like no other. Fully human, he is also the Son of God. He is called ‘Saviour’, ‘Christ the Lord’, ‘Messiah’, ‘Emmanuel’. He is God incarnate - God’s loving presence enfleshed in human history. Because of this child, the world is reconciled with God.

Shepherds and angels
Choirs of angels, glory, shining light, cosmic praises... Luke’s Gospel (2:8-19) is telling us that the extraordinary gift of a Messiah which the whole world has been awaiting is here. But notice who is the first to receive this message: not royalty, not the wealthy and powerful, not heads of state, but shepherds - simple people, the poorest of the poor, a group often eyed with suspicion and often including thieves. Here lies the paradox of the Incarnation: the glory of God is received in poverty and simplicity. The first to witness the Christ event, the shepherds also become the first evangelists.

Wise men from the east
The story of the magi in Matthew’s Gospel (2:1-12) is the story of the journey of the Gentiles towards the Messiah. The wise men, ‘foreigners’ from the east, approach the Christ-child from outside the religious and cultural heritage of the Jewish people. Luke’s Gospel is telling us that the salvation Jesus brings is for all peoples, the whole world; all humanity is called to believe in Christ.
25th December

We do not know the actual date of Jesus’ birth. We do know that from the fourth and fifth centuries Christians began Christianising a pagan Roman feast that celebrated the sun god, the ‘invincible sun’. This feast was commonly held on 25th December. After months of winter darkness, 25th December marked the turning point from when the days would start to lengthen again. The Christian version of this feast celebrated Christ, the true light of the world, who has pierced the darkness of sin. Eventually this date became part of the Christian liturgical calendar.

Prayer around the crib

Luke’s Gospel tells us that Mary pondered in her heart all the wonderous events accompanying her son’s birth (2:19).

As you gaze upon the crib, ponder the Jesus story in the depths of your heart.

God our Father,

We rejoice in the birth of our Saviour.
May we embrace the mystery of your great love in our own human story.

Amen.

Some things to ponder at the Christmas Crib

• Jesus Christ, born of a woman, is God’s gift of love to the world. Who are the people in my life who have shown me God’s love?

• Mary and Joseph and their unborn child were not welcomed at the local inn. How welcoming am I towards others?

• Mary and Joseph were people of great faith and trust in God. How trusting am I of God, especially when life is difficult?

• Jesus was born in poverty and first revealed to simple shepherds. How can I simplify my own lifestyle so as to be more open to God’s presence?

• Jesus is the Word made flesh. What words of love, hope, truth do I communicate to others?

• The gift of Jesus is for the whole world. With whom would I most like to share my gift of Christian faith?

John 1:1-18

In John’s Gospel there is no nativity story. Instead, we find a very different, more philosophical kind of reflection on the Incarnation.

Christ is described as ‘the Word made flesh’.

The ‘word’ was an important religious concept for the ancients.

For the Greeks the ‘word’ or ‘logos’ was an intermediary between God and the created universe. The logos made the world intelligible. Applied to Christ, ‘the Word’ is the one who reveals the Father. It is by the Word that all things exist and through whom people can penetrate the eternal mystery of God.

To the semitic mind the ‘word’ involved a definite challenge: A word or call from God confronted the receiver with a choice of acceptance or rejection. In this sense Christ, the word, brings people to faith.

Christians today continue to proclaim their belief in Christ, God’s eternal Word enfleshed, the source of all life, light and truth.

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