

**PASTOR'S MEANDERINGS
CHRISTMAS**

24 – 25 DECEMBER 2019



Dear members of the Church, parishioners and guests: Merry Christmas!!

It dawned on me in one of those seemingly interminably long quiet moments over at the rectory these past week that this is my tenth year that I have had the privilege of celebrating Christmas with you. (I know some are probably says “its only been that long” while others are looking at each other and commiserating over the fact that “it seems so much longer”.) Your support over those years has, quite honestly, been overwhelming. And this past year with the 25th anniversary and the past three months has only verified that reality for me. There is no way that I can every fully express my appreciation.

On behalf of our parish St. Stephen, Martyr Roman Catholic Church we wish to welcome you to our beautifully decorated church on this wondrously joyful Feast. A heartfelt Merry Christmas also to all of our parishioners as we join together with our guests in thanksgiving to God for all the ways in which He has blessed us. It is with great joy that we celebrate the birth of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ!

We have been praying all through the time of Advent, these past short three weeks, for the coming of the Lord Jesus and today we celebrate His first coming with His birth in Bethlehem. We also celebrate His continuing presence to us throughout the year in Scripture and in

Sacrament especially the Eucharist. And on this very special day we acknowledge that He has come anew into our hearts on this Christmas Feast. It is a new day, a new beginning and all the more so if we have prepared well during the Season of Advent for this celebration.

What a day! This is the day we celebrate as the day when God Himself came into our world. We should be in absolute awe of this great mystery; it is a moment in time that testifies to God's great love for each of us ... for you! God passionately loves you! So much so that He allowed Himself to be humbled. We commemorate on this day how the God of all the universe came into our world over 2000 years ago out of love for you and me! An action that He would have taken on if only for you or me! We pray that you sit back in this moment and simply absorb that thought. He didn't have to come, He chose to come, out of that passionate love that defines the relationship He desires to have with us.

How does that affect our lives? We pray that it has an impact on every aspect of our lives for Jesus laid everything on the line for us. He was born so that He could die for our salvation and then, by accepting His death for the forgiveness of our sins and living out our faith daily with the help of our baptismal grace, we might not suffer eternal death, but be born into eternal life. What a marvelous exchange! On a day where the secular world celebrates only an exchange of gifts, the Lord extends to us and everyone the greatest gift of all!

We here at St. Stephen, Martyr Church hope and pray that you embrace this great gift all the days of your life. We welcome you to our community and invite you to become a part of the many ways that we seek to spread this message of Good News to the community surrounding us and our world. This gift that God has offered to us is not meant to be hidden, but to be offered to one and all. The backbone of our parish is those who volunteer as teachers, catechists, ministers of the liturgy, environment enhancement, music, parish life, Walking with Purpose, Knights of Columbus, Bible study, prayer groups, Appalachian Service Project, social ministry, etc. The list never ends. I invite you to consider if you have not yet found a work or ministry within the community that you think of exploring what is happening here and join in. Many people find that joining a church organization can be an excellent way to live out the Gospel values while making new friends and having the opportunity to socialize.

I speak not only for myself but also on behalf of Deacon Kevin and the entire staff in wishing you a very Merry Christmas and a New Year that is filled with much peace and happiness for you and your families.

CHRISTMAS REFLECTION

It has been said that Christmas is one of the great handicaps that Christians must contend with. The commercialism and the sentimentality of the season, the tinsel and the glitter, the Christmas trees and the decorative lights all tend to create a fairy -tale atmosphere, to rob our celebration of the mystery of the Incarnation of its truly religious character, and to distract us from the central Christmas assertion that 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'.

Nevertheless, even the externals of Christmas, the traditional rituals of Midnight Mass, the cribs, the carols and the lights remind us of the essentials of the Christian message, invite us to rejoice in the assertion that 'Christ was born in Bethlehem', and assure us that His birth continues to give joy to the world. The exchange of gifts, which sometimes may be little more than an exercise in urbanity, can be an expression of human solidarity and good-will, a recognition of our dependence on one another, and a strengthening of the bonds of friendship that unite us and enrich our lives. The greetings that wish other people happiness, the prayers that express a longing for peace, the treasured texts that tell of a light that shines and of salvation that is offered to the people of every race and land, all help to revitalize our Christian faith and stimulate us to live by what is best and noblest in the human spirit.

The cynic might say that all our cheerful greetings and joyful hymns, all our prayers and reflections on the Christmas message of peace and salvation, are nothing more than a wallowing in sentimentality, a flight from harsh reality into warm fantasy, a romantic interlude in a world where ugliness, violence and the signs of the inhumanity of so many human hearts are too much in evidence. So why, we may ask ourselves, do we celebrate at Christmas? We focus our attention on the Child of Bethlehem. Our readings call Him Prince-of-Peace, and they inform us that He came from the kingly line of David. Born in the obscurity of the Judean hills this Prince did not come to rule or to control. He did not come with a love of power, but with the power of love. He came in poverty and manifested Himself to the poor so that we might be enriched by His life and by His teaching. He taught us that there is greatness in humility, glory in service, and power in self-surrender. He revealed the goodness and kindness of God to a world where selfishness, hatred and divisions were, and still are, all too familiar. By His example He showed that we, His disciples, should also follow the way of peace and love, the way of kindness and service, the way of consideration and generosity.

Christmas is a time to celebrate and to relax, a warm and lovely time, a season of light and hope. Yet even in this joyful season we cannot forget either the harshness of the circumstances into which Jesus was born or the painful and tragic experiences of our own world. The thought that Jesus came to save and to relieve suffering is a challenge to us to continue His work by making our little contribution to the task of healing human brokenness, by fostering peace and harmony in human relationships, and by bringing a little light into the darkness and confusion of the world we know. At Christmas we celebrate the fact that the Son of God dwelt among us to restore our fallen world, we yearn for a world that would be fully restored in Christ, and we pay tribute to life on earth as we would wish it to be and as we know it should be.

STEWARDSHIP: For unto us is born this day a Savior! In response to so great a love, only the gift of my whole self will do. You have given us Yourself, dear Lord; in love and thanksgiving, I commit myself afreah to You.

John Henry Cardinal Newman

"May each Christmas, as it comes, find us more and more like Him who at this time became a little child, for our sake; more simpleminded, more humble, more affectionate, more resigned, more happy, more full of God."

READINGS FOR Feast of the Holy Family

28 – 29 DEC '19

Sir. 3:2-6, 12-14: Ben Sirach offers some reflections on the fourth commandment and the duties of children towards parents.

Col. 3:12-21: Family life lived in the Lord has many challenges. If we try to have love as the motivating force at the heart of family commitment, then the message of Christ in all its richness will find a home in us.

Mt. 2:13-15, 19-23: The gospel highlights Joseph's role in the Holy Family. Totally open to the divine in his life, Joseph is ready to do whatever God reveals to him, with a minimum of fuss, and with ready obedience.

Pope St. John Paul II

"Every effort to make society sensitive to the importance of the family is a great service to humanity."

ICON THE NATIVITY

(Located at the entrance to the church)

The classic Byzantine icon of the Nativity gives us a much different picture of the event compared to more recent western images. The whole purpose of this icon is to instruct, to make visible the story of Christ's birth, the miracle of the Incarnation of God. This story is found in two Gospel accounts, Mt. 2:1-12, and Lk. 2:1-20. Additional elements have become a part of Christian traditions that are found in ancient writings not included in the Canonical Bible.

In the 5th and 6th centuries, pilgrims to the Holy Land would bring home small bottles of oil from the lamps burning in sacred places. The images on these bottles provided prototypes for some of the scenes included in this icon.

Theology and Symbolism

The central focus of the images is the mother and Child within a dark cave. The symbolic meaning of the cave is the world, dark with sin through man's fault, now illuminated by the Light of the Incarnation. The Virgin Mary gently lays her Babe into the manger. The Greek letters near her proclaim that she is *Mater Theou*, the Mother of God. The Child Jesus is wrapped like a mummy because Luke's Gospel refers to "wrapped in band of cloth" (Lk. 2:7, 12) and also to symbolically foreshadow His death and burial. (the manger is an icon of His crib, His church, and His tomb, all in one.) the ox and ass are present in the cave, as they are present in nearly every Nativity scene, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 1:3: "the ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."

In the lower left corner sits a confused and dejected St. Joseph in a green robe, with halo of sanctity and labeled in Greek to reflect his importance. He is being confronted by the devil disguised as an old shepherd, who is trying to persuade Joseph that a virgin birth is not possible. In the lower right are two women washing the Child. There are two midwives brought by Joseph to attend Mary as described in the apocryphal Gospels of pseudo-Matthew and pseudo-James.

The other elements of the scene are part of the canonical Gospel stories. The wise men from the East bearing gifts are described in Matthew 2:1-12. The angels bringing "good news of

great joy” to shepherds tending their flocks is a familiar passage from Luke 2:8-14. The Star of Bethlehem (Mt. 2:9) directs a ray directly toward the Child. The star is represented as a hole in the sphere of Heaven, letting a ray of Divine Light fall upon Him. The Greek inscription near the top of the icon translates as the “The Birth of the Messiah.”

This icon represents not only the miracle of the Incarnation but also the effect of that miracle upon the world. All creation is represented at the event; the earth by the hills and cave, the heavens by the star, animals and plants, angels in both their roles of Divine messengers and glorifiers of God, and humanity – the wise and the simple, good and evil, the young and the old, men and women.

WAS CHRIST REALLY BORN ON DECEMBER 25TH?

One would think that if anyone’s date of birth were remembered exactly, it would be that of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, the gospels do not pinpoint the date of Christ’s birth. The reason is probably that the focus of the gospels is on the *kerygma* or mystery of redemption– the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. This focus is also probably why St. Mark’s Gospel does not even include the Christmas story but begins with the Baptism of the Lord at the River Jordan. Easter, on the other hand, can be better dated because of its linkage with Passover.

Prior to the legalization of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine in the year 313, no universal date or even formal celebration of Christmas is found. For instance, Origen (d. 255), St. Irenaeus (d. 202), and Tertullian (d. 220) do not include Christmas or its date on their lists of feasts and celebrations.

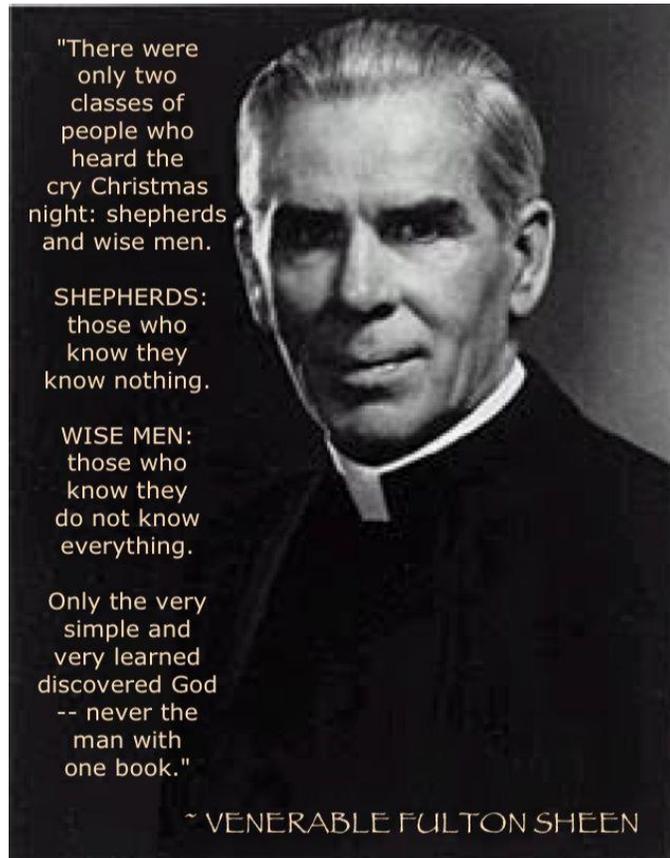
After legalization, the Church was better able to establish universal dates for feasts and to organize their public celebration. Moreover, we now see the Church addressing controversies concerning Jesus as true God and true man, and how He entered this world. Such concern about the mystery of the incarnation would focus more attention on the importance of celebrating Christmas, the birth of our Lord.

On the more “practical” side of this issue, Roman pagans used to gather at the hill where the Vatican is presently located to commemorate the “Birth of the Unconquered Sun.” This pagan feast was celebrated throughout the Empire either on December 25th (according to the Julian Calendar) or on January 6th (according to the Egyptian calendar). Although not proven with certainty, some historians credit Constantine, who declared Sunday as a day of rest in the Empire, with replacing the pagan festival with that of Christmas. Interestingly, since the 200s, Jesus was honored with the title, “Sun of Justice.”

Somehow all of these elements converged to the formal celebration of Christmas on December 25th. For instance, Christmas was celebrated in Rome by Pope Liberius (352-66) on December 25th. On December 25, 379, St. Gregory Nazianzus (d. 389) preached a Christmas sermon in Constantinople. In the Cathedral of Milan, St. Ambrose (d. 397) celebrated Christmas on December 25. Therefore, by the year 400, generally, the birth of Christ was set on December 25th with the exception of Palestine, where it was celebrated on January 6th until the mid-600s when it was then transferred to December 25th.

As an aside, the Feast of the Epiphany also emerged in Gaul (the Roman province of present day France) about the year 361. This feast was moved to January 6th which remains the official date.

While the concern for exact dating may preoccupy us at times, the most important point is celebrating the birth of our Lord and meditating on His incarnation. Remember that the title *Christmas* is derived from the Old English title *Cristes Maesse* which means "The Mass of Christ." Each time we celebrate Mass and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord in the Holy Eucharist, we celebrate Christmas, when He, true God, was born as true man.





"I GOT YOU SOMETHING TO SAVE TIME THIS CHRISTMAS."