

***An Adult Appreciation of the  
Christmas Story***



***Fr. John Cusick***

## AN ADULT APPRECIATION OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY

Can you ever remember a time when you didn't know the Christmas story, the story of the birth of Christ?

Even before we were able to comprehend it, our parents told it to us over and over again. It had all the magic to captivate the imagination of a child: the birth of a baby, a very special baby loved by Mary and Joseph, angels and shepherds, magi and kings, expensive gifts, animals, a manger, and even a special star.

Yet it is not a children's story. It is the Gospel story, the proclamation of Christ, the Savior of the world, not just the magic of a child's imagination.

As a matter of fact, the section of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke devoted to the birth of Christ were probably the last parts written. Women and men deeply affected by the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and the impact His life made on them, and the possibilities now offered by life itself, were not so much concerned about the intimate details of the actions of Christ as they were about the meaning of Christ. So, when they proclaimed the Christ-event, it was His meaning, not facts and data, that concerned them the most.

To highlight our Christmas and to make the Christmas story, the birth of Christ, come alive for us as adult men and women, it might be helpful to seek some meaning in the elements of the story.

**May the Christmas story never lose its magic for you. May we always dream about it and imagine it happening over and over again. May it make you wonder and believe in the mystery of life, a mystery so powerful and profound that you come away with the knowledge and the understanding, the faith and the courage, to realize the power of God at work in you and in this world.**

## THE CHRISTMAS STORY ACCORDING TO MATTHEW AND LUKE

### Gospel of Luke 2:1-14

In those days Caesar Augustus published a decree ordering a census of the whole world. This first census took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone went to register, each to his own town. And so, Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to David's town of Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David to register with Mary, his espoused wife, who was with child.

While they were there the days of her confinement were completed. She gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the place where travelers lodged.

There were shepherds in the locality, living in the fields and keeping night watch by turns over their flock. The angel of the Lord shone around them, and they were very much afraid, the angel said to them: "You have nothing to fear! I come to proclaim good news to you—tidings of great joy to be shared by the whole people.

This day in David's city a savior has been born to you, the Messiah and Lord. Let this be a sign to you; in a manger you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes." Suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in high heaven, peace on earth to those whom his favor rests."

### Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus' birth in Bethlehem of Judea during the reign of King Herod, astrologers from the east arrived one day in Jerusalem inquiring, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews?"

We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." At this news King Herod became greatly disturbed and with him all Jerusalem summoning all of the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem of Judea," they informed him. "Here is what the prophet has written:

'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the princes of Judah, since from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Herod called the astrologers aside and found out from them the exact time of the star's appearance. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, after having instructed: "Go and get detailed information about the child. When you have discovered something, report your findings to me so that I may go and offer him homage

After their audience with the king, they set out. The star which they had observed at its rising went ahead of them until it came to a standstill over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house, found the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their coffers and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They received a message in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went back to their own country by another route.

## The Christmas Story Unwrapped

The world in which Jesus was born was ruled by the Romans and Caesar Augustus, the Emperor. He was called by many people at that time, the "savior of the world" for ushering in a time of world peace that was unheard of before.

By beginning his Gospel by mentioning Caesar Augustus and the census, Luke hints that the Emperor inadvertently ushered in an age of peace by calling the census which brought the Holy Family to the City of David for the birth of Christ, the Prince of Peace and the humble Savior of the world. The sign of the importance of Christ was the STAR. In the world at that time, people would not have found it bizarre to claim that a star rose to herald the King of the Jews, the Savior of the world. Stars and other celestial objects were signs of the birth of significant people in ancient times. People believed that nature revealed divine reality. Consequently, they commonly used astrological signs to signify uncommon events in life.

So, to people deeply affected by Christ, it was normal for them, reflecting on the significance of His life, to give Him a star at His birth. After all, to them and to us, Jesus Christ, not any political leader, is the Savior of the world.

The Gentiles believed that everyone could come to know God through nature. Hence, the importance of the MAGI, learned Gentiles on a journey seeking truth and God. They followed nature, astrology, that led them to Jerusalem where they consulted with the Jewish leaders who believed people could come to a knowledge of God in the Scriptures. The power of God is in Jesus, in the flesh and blood of humanity. We call it the Incarnation: God and humankind are one, literally one. The Christmas story develops that so well by having faithful Gentiles, the Magi, journey through the two known ways of seeking God to uncover the most profound and life giving experience of God. They journey from stars to religious tradition to human life. No more do we need to look to sunsets and canyons and starlit nights, or even to sacred books alone for what happened once upon a time, but we can look to one another, to humanity, for the dwelling place of God.

All of our homes probably contain some configuration of the Nativity scene. Maybe something as simple as just Mary, Joseph and the Baby, or a village scene resplendent with crib and manger and animals and angels and Magi. . .the works.

The MANGER is a very interesting symbol in the Gospels. It is usually seen by us as a sign that Christ was born in poverty. After all, there was "no room for them in the inn." Though Jesus did come from very simple surroundings, the manger where He was laid had a profound theological statement to make. It says everything about God and His people understanding each other. Luke used the birth of Christ in the manger to highlight what was said in Isaiah (1:13), "The ox knows its owner and the donkey knows the manger of its Lord, but Israel has not known me and my people have not understood me." Luke's Gospel seems to be saying this: In Jesus, Israel has at last found its Lord. So have we.

Also, we must remember that a manger was a feed trough for animals. Perhaps another significance could be this: In the early Church, the people who ultimately brought the Gospels in written form, the

great symbol for the continued presence of Christ among them was the "breaking of the bread", the Eucharist. The Lord Jesus was the food that sustained them. Is it any wonder then that the new-born Lord is placed in a feed trough as a sign that from birth He is destined to be food and sustenance to God's people?

The first revelation of the birth of Christ, announcing Him as the Savior of the world and its Messiah, was made to SHEPHERDS. They weren't just around for the evening. There were many different types of shepherds at the time of Christ and there could be several different reasons for their presence at the birth of Christ. The following are two possibilities: For us shepherds seem to be very gentle, common people. Yet, in fact, the shepherds were outlaws, bandits and considerably dishonest. In Jewish terms, they were outside the Law. . . forever. So much of what Jesus revealed throughout His life was that sinners and the "outsiders" could be one people of God. In the kingdom of God there were no outs and ins, good and bad, but there was hope for us all. That revelation was moved to the birth event also.

### **Sharon's Christmas Prayer**

She was five, sure of the facts, and recited them  
with slow solemnity, convinced every word was revelation  
She said  
they were so poor  
they only had peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat and they went a long way from home without  
getting lost.  
The lady rode a donkey, the man walked, and the baby  
was inside the lady.  
They had to stay in a stable with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)  
but the Three Rich Men found them because a star lighted the roof. Shepherds came and you could pet  
the sheep but not feed them. Then the baby was borne.

And do you know who he was? Her quarter eyes inflated to silver dollars

The baby was God.  
And she jumped in the air,  
whirled round, dove into the sofa,  
and buried her head under the cushions which is the only proper response  
to the Good News of the Incarnation.

John Shea

### **A Christmas Carol**

The Christ-child lay on Mary's lap,  
His hair was like a light.  
(O weary, weary is the world,  
But here it is all right.)

The Christ-child lay on Mary's breast,  
His hair was like a star.  
(O stern and cunning are the kings,  
But here the true hearts are.)

The Christ-child lay on Mary's heart,  
His hair was like a fire.  
(O weary, weary is the world,  
But here the world's desire.)

The Christ-child stood at Mary's knee,  
His hair was like a crown,  
(And all the flowers looked up at Him,  
And all the stars looked down.)

*G.K. Chesterton*

### **“Silent Night!**

Silent night! Holy night!  
All is calm, all is bright  
Round yon Virgin Mother and Child.  
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,  
Sleep in heavenly peace;  
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night! Holy night!  
Shepherds quake at the sight!  
Glories stream from heaven afar,  
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia;  
Christ, the Savior, is born!  
Christ, the Savior, is born!

Silent night! Holy night!  
Son of God, love's pure light  
Radiant beams from thy holy face,  
With the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth;  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth