

## **Third Sunday in Advent – 15<sup>th</sup> December 2024**

### **The Third Joyful Mystery: The Nativity of our Lord**

In the third Joyful Mystery we are invited to meditate upon the Nativity of our Lord. The familiar story of the events surrounding Christ's birth comes to us through the gospels of both St Matthew and St Luke. In Luke's narration, the focus is upon the angelic proclamation to shepherds of the news of the birth of Jesus whilst Matthew focuses upon the visit of the Magi to see the Christ child.

The visit of the Magi is believed to have taken place some months after the birth of Jesus (potentially up to two years after, based upon scholars' interpretation of the questions Herod asks the Magi in the second chapter of Matthew). In contrast, Luke's gospel suggests the shepherds' visit took place almost immediately after Jesus' birth.

Despite this, the bringing together of the shepherds and the Magi in the nativity tableau with which we are all familiar provides a helpful focus for our meditation on the birth of Jesus and an opportunity to consider it through the eyes of his parents, the Jewish shepherds and the Gentile Magi. We have St Francis to thank for the creation of the nativity scene, originally staged with live animals in a nearby cave in the Italian town of Greccio. Following a visit to the Holy Land where he had seen Jesus' birthplace, St Francis thought that recreating this scene in local areas would help believers. In 'The Life of St Francis', St. Bonaventure tells us that St Francis said,

"I want to do something that will recall the memory of that Child who was born in Bethlehem, to see with bodily eyes the inconveniences of his infancy, how he lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by."

Subsequently, static nativity scenes have become popular around the world with additional figures being added, often very charmingly, to represent local people and their traditions, so that we are able to picture ourselves also standing or kneeling near to the manger and to contemplate the mystery of Christ's birth and its meaning for us.

This idea of stopping to contemplate the birth of Jesus is beautifully encapsulated in the words of The Angelus, recited at noon throughout the year. Again a tradition that is likely to have originated from the Franciscans, the prayer draws from the gospels of both St Luke ('Behold the handmaid of the Lord' Luke 1:38) and St John ('And the Word was made flesh' John 1:14).

When I first saw 'The Angelus' painting by Jean-François Millet in the Musée D'Orsay in Paris as a teenager I was struck by the way in which the painter had managed to capture that moment of absolute stillness when the field workers stop what they are doing upon the ringing of the Angelus church bells (we can just see the church in the background of the painting) to focus on their prayer. Millet himself said of the work,

"The idea for The Angelus came to me because I remembered that my grandmother, hearing the church bell ringing while we were working in the fields, always made us stop work to say the Angelus prayer for the poor departed".

The Angelus also draws us back to the enigmatic line in Luke 2:19 after Jesus' birth when we are told 'As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.' For Mary, her contemplation of the mystery of her son's conception, his birth and his future continued throughout his life ultimately taking her to the foot of the cross. In his well-known song 'Thorns in the Straw' the modern hymn writer Graham Kendrick considers Mary watching her child sleep in the manger and ponders:

'And did she see there in the straw  
By His head a thorn  
And did she smell myrrh  
In the air on that starry night  
And did she hear angels sing  
Not so far away  
Till at last the sun  
Rose blood red in the morning sky'

Rachel Grayson