

## 2021 Christmas Midnight Mass

1. **I was in disbelief a few days ago** when I noticed in one of our big department stores that the Boxing Day sale had already begun before Christmas! There is a link between the Christmas mystery we celebrate tonight and the commercialization of Christmas we encounter each year. **It is wonder at this mystery that once shaped a great part of our western culture.** Tonight my purpose is not the critique of a culture, but an invitation to embrace again the real culture of Christmas. Three great mysteries are veiled under the Christmas liturgies: a Child who is God! A Mother who is a virgin! And a real father who is not the Father! **To lose our awe over this is a greater loss** than the commercialization we know so well.

2. **There is a story about David, an outstanding shepherd.** At night, he could identify his sheep by running his hands through their wool and feeling the shape of their cloven hoofs. He could distinguish his sheep from other sheep by their smell. When he bred them he knew which mother ewes produced the most milk and which rams were the strongest. He was careful to cross the best only with the best so as to get the best. He knew his flock and his flock knew his whistle. He dreamt about its increase each night. **Then one midnight clear his sleep and dreams were shattered by news of Jesus' birth.**

3. **As the small coterie of shepherds ran in search of the manger, David was gripped with anxiety at the prospect of leaving his 98 sheep** on the hill side defenceless in the dark. When the rough band broke into the silence of the stable, the angel's words were still ringing in his ears: "Today, in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord!" (Luke 2:11) When the baby glanced at him, all of a sudden, he broke out into loud wailing and sobbing. His fellow shepherds tried to shush him up but in vain! Each time he let out his wail, the baby smiled and wriggled

vigorously in his swaddling clothes. This communication went on for a while! **It was a strange sight indeed.**

4. **It's a strange sight - a Mother who is a virgin! Her Child who is God! And a real father who is not his Father!** This is in contradiction to all our natural experience. It excludes a lot of explanations and includes a lot of risks and unknowns. Before Mary arrived in Bethlehem, **she was learning this new path.** There was the first risk of her "Yes" to Gabriel – "how can this be since I have no husband?" (Lk 1:34) There was the risk of losing Joseph who considered divorcing her informally. That would be followed by the risk of gossip in the community. On Christmas day she faced the risk of giving birth in a stable. **The decision to follow Jesus stirs our fears and exposes us to many risks. Today we have idolized safety.**

5. **Before Joseph arrived in Bethlehem late at night he had his dark nights.** He had to face the possible shame of his family if he married an already pregnant woman. He risked Mary's reputation if he divorced her. He risked disappointing Mary whom he loved dearly. He was not spared his own interior agony. A Child who is God! A Mother who is a virgin! And a real father who is not the Father! **The Christmas mystery puts us at risk only to bring us a new joy, God's joy.**

6. **What impact would Mary's virginal birth have on a culture? Its effects are not immediately apparent.** Motherhood reaches a new dimension which would become more and more common as the centuries pass. Mary became a mother before she married Joseph. Her bond of motherhood was not forged by human contract or emotional or physical bonds. Instead it began with an act of faith: "How can this be since I do not know man?... Let it be to me according to your word." (Lk 1:34,38) Faith does and can produce in a woman a fecundity unheard of before. Today, many virgins

consecrated to God conceive and bear children for God through their dedicated nurturing and accompaniment of the disciples of the Lord in and for faith. **The Christmas mystery impregnates a culture with deep wonder at the spiritual capacity of a human being.**

**7. Joseph, too, adds something to being husband and father that no culture has ever seen before.** Joseph at first is engaged to Mary before they are married. After he is given the knowledge of the divine Child she is carrying, he takes her in marriage only in obedience to God, that is, in faith. Their deepest bond in marriage is first faith which unites them both in God before they live together as man and wife but without sexual relationships. In a highly sexualized culture, such a husband-wife relationship for life is almost unthinkable. Joseph's contribution to culture is very great indeed. **It elevates the virginal relationship of friendship between a man and a woman to a new and unheard of level. Today we want friendships but doubt their possibilities.**

**8. The Christmas mysteries carry these new realities into our daily life and thus into culture.** But our wonder at the mystery depends upon faith. Apart from lack of faith – the loss of wonder is fuelled by distraction. We are not here because we lack faith. But we can carry a lot of distraction with regard to the Christmas mystery. Not just the Christmas risk of Mary and Joseph. COVID is a risk! Vaccines or no vaccines are a risk! Scandal in the Church makes trust in our leaders a risk, then there are other challenges like living under a government that puts our faith at risk, or world organizations that support a reset without God. **The mystery is stronger than all this!** What can be dangerous in a world where God is with us? Mary made a choice, Joseph made a choice, the shepherds made a choice, a choice to be with Jesus no matter the risk, no matter the danger, no matter the distraction! **But what surpasses all that is that God**

**made a choice today – to be with us!** He wants us to put aside our distracting fears and make a priority of being with him.

**9. The second reading is taken from Paul's letter to Titus.** Did you notice how Paul switches suddenly from the appearance of Jesus to ethical response to him. We can miss the connection! Christmas should make us live better lives not by compulsion but because the theophany of Christmas is an expression of God's benevolent kindness, his *philanthropia*, as Paul calls it. We get our word philanthropy from this word. God's grace is the ultimate kind of philanthropy. "Jesus is the embodied presence of God's favour" or grace (Daniel J. Harrington, SJ; Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. XII, The Pastoral Epistles, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville MN, 1991 pp 217-221). This prior awareness that God loves us so deeply cleanses all our choices and shapes our freedom. The effect of this divine grace is the taming of our rebelliousness by his presence. This training grace, says St. Paul, does three things to us: we begin to live temperately, justly and devoutly.

**10. It is the awareness of God's intense desire to be with us always that transforms hearts.** No revolution, no new discovery or invention, no government has the power to match this power of this mystery. On the way back to the sheep, one of the youngest shepherds turned to David and asked quite candidly: "Why were you sobbing like that?" He answered, "The Messiah is with us. He waited for me! He smiled at me because he saw me! He loves me! I am no longer alone." A Child who is God! **A Mother who is a virgin! And a real father who is not the Father! Come, let us embrace them! Come let us adore him!**