

## The First Christmas Mass

### Homily for Christmas Eve 2022

Tonight, as we gather again and for the first time in larger numbers since 2019, it is good to hear once more the story of Jesus' birth as told by St. Luke. As we think about this most familiar of Gospel passages, I want to highlight for you what St Luke is doing in a very intentional way. In an artistic way St Luke is presenting the first Christmas Mass. He is making a connection between the birth of Jesus, in a manger, with the way Jesus will become in the Eucharist our spiritual food.

For remember a manger was a feeding trough for animals. On the night of Jesus' birth there was nowhere else for Mary to place Jesus than in this receptacle traditionally used for hay. St Luke asks us to consider that even here at the Lord's birth we see anticipated the events that will mark the culmination of Jesus' life starting on Holy Thursday – that night before his Good Friday Crucifixion.

Think for instance of the way Jesus is wrapped, in swaddling clothes. As such he would have been wrapped very tightly anticipating what would happen, when after his death, he would be wrapped in the burial shroud and laid in the tomb. The manger is also a kind of tomb.

But here is the main point that I want to emphasize for you this evening. When we hear this passage, we often assume that when the couple arrived at Bethlehem there was no room for them at the local Bethlehem Inn. Room 7 nor any other room was available. There was a "no vacancy" sign.

This is how we read this verse:

***Mary laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.***

Now there is a word that is usually used for inn that we find later in Luke's Gospel in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter where Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan who takes the man who had been beaten by bandits and entrusts him to the innkeeper at the local inn. In that verse the more common word for inn is used, meaning a hostel or small hotel. But in Luke chapter 2 the word for inn is different than this more common word, and it is only found twice in this Gospel. Here in chapter two and then later in chapter 22.

To understand the meaning of this word I need to tell you something about first century Jewish homes. They were very simple. There would have been a doorway that would take you upstairs to the main room of the house. On the left-hand side of the room there would have been a manger where the animals would eat. You could bring them inside at nighttime to keep them safe and to warm your home in the winter. Now to the right of the main room there would have been a guest room where visitors would stay. Because everyone who was from Bethlehem had to return to their ancestral home for the census St Joseph's extended family would all be gathered in the family home, or homes. The word that is usually translated as "Inn" would be better translated as "guest room". In other words, there was no room for Mary and Joseph in the guest room because it was already occupied, and so the only place to lay the infant Jesus was in the manger on the other side of the house.

It is as we see the connection with this word in chapter 2 and then compare it with chapter 22 that it becomes very significant. In chapter 22 St Luke writes, quoting Jesus:

***Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house which he enters,<sup>1</sup> and tell the householder, 'The Teacher says to you, where is the guest room, where I am to eat the Passover with my disciples'<sup>1</sup>***

This term “guest room” is the same word that was translated as “Inn” in the Christmas Story. And notice what Jesus says, it is in this guest room where there will now be room for Jesus so that not only can he eat the Passover with his disciples, but he will then institute the Eucharist, the Mass that we celebrate this night.

This is what I am inviting you to ponder and consider this evening. What do we call this day? “Yes, of course “Christmas”. This is because it is the Mass of Christ. What the Church has us celebrate is that on this day when there was no room in the guest room for Jesus the manger became the place where he was laid. This action anticipated how Jesus would ultimately become our spiritual food when in another guest room that had been prepared for him, he would say “This is my body, this is my blood”.

That St Luke accentuates this Eucharistic theme is made clear in the words that the angels sing to the shepherds at the end of our Gospel reading:

***“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours”.***

These words form the basis for the song we sing at the beginning of Mass.

***Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people of good will. We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you.***

So how does what I have just taught you about this passage mean for us today?

Let me return to the beginning of this evening’s reading:

***In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.<sup>2</sup> This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.<sup>3</sup> And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city<sup>2</sup>***

What St. Luke is doing at the beginning of his story is locate the news about Jesus within the framework of the stories that would have been followed by most people, those dealing with the government and how the laws of the government were influencing and affecting the people. These are the news stories that back then and today preoccupy us because of the direct bearing they have on our lives.

Think of how in the years we have just weathered there were policies put in place because of COVID and how these stories were always before us.

What St Luke is inviting us to consider is that in a world where the news cycle will always grab our attention and concern, there is another story that is also at play. A story of a birth that happened 2000 thousand years ago that marks the time when God became Man and opened a way for us to see life’s deeper meaning and purpose as we consider the news of the Christmas story.

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Lk 22:10–11). (2006). Ignatius Press.

<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Lk 2:1–3). (2006). Ignatius Press.

I pondered this story, I realized that over the course of 2 millennia there have been millions of headlines like the one St Luke uses at the beginning of the Christmas story. But as the headlines come and go, this story has remained constant and is remembered every year. Why is that? Well, perhaps because in the story of Christmas we are drawn into a drama that is bigger than the year end headlines. In this story we remember that the manger is a prefiguration of the Eucharist, that Christ, the babe in Bethlehem, is food for the whole world. Did you know the name of the very city in Hebrew, Bethlehem, means "house of bread". *Beth* means *house* and *lehem* means *bread*. So, Jesus, the bread of life, is born in the house of bread and laid in a manger to be bread for the life of the world.

The Mass on the Feast of Christmas celebrates the one who not only became a little child, but who comes to us in a little host as bread for the whole world. This is what the First Christmas Mass in Bethlehem declared as did the Last Supper in that Upper Room in Jerusalem. I pray that this will inspire each of us to be those who who welcome Jesus to be the guest in our lives, to have him come into our hearts, souls, minds and bodies so that Christmas and every Mass be seen as a precious gift because here Jesus comes to us in a way as he did that first Christmas.