

Christmas Day, Year A

GOSPEL

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[Here we use the gospel reading for Midnight Mass.]

Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken. This census—the first—took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to his own town to be registered. So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and travelled up to Judaea, to the town of David called Bethlehem, since he was of David's House and line, in order to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn. In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' And suddenly with the angel there was a great throng of the heavenly host, praising God and singing:

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and peace to those who enjoy his favour.'

(Luke 2:1–14)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Luke's Gospel is sometimes referred to as the 'gospel of joy' because this theme of rejoicing and joy is often repeated.
- Caesar Augustus ruled the Roman Empire from 27 BC to AD 14. He was the great nephew of Julius Caesar.
- A Roman census was usually undertaken for purposes of taxation but also at times for other ends, such as conscription or forced labour.
- A problem of timing exists within this text. Most scholars agree that Jesus was born about 6 BC in the reign of Herod the Great. However, Quirinius was not appointed as governor of Syria until about eleven years later. After his appointment, he did in fact supervise a census of the region.
- Luke goes to great pains in this text to situate Jesus' birth in the historical world of the time.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The gospel reading for the Midnight Mass is Luke's brief but profound description of the birth of Jesus. Only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke give any information on this remarkable event, and both represent the unfolding of christological understandings over time. It is likely that Luke uses the device of the census to explain why Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem, the predicted birthplace of the Messiah, when it is common knowledge that Jesus came from Nazareth. At the centre of Luke's story is the proclamation of the birth to the shepherds in the fields and their reaction to it. (In Matthew, the proclamation comes to the Gentile magi or wise men.) At the time, shepherds were regarded as among the lowest of the population. They did not have a good reputation and were not to be trusted! But it is to these, not the high and mighty of the land, that God chooses to announce the birth of the saviour. In the continuation of the text, the shepherds are shown as accepting the proclamation and going 'with haste' to Bethlehem to 'see the thing that has taken place.' They are not checking the veracity of the angel's story but believe it implicitly. Their response is immediate. They return to their fields 'glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, as it had been told them.' Their response to the coming of the Messiah is wholehearted!

- How strong is your belief in all that has been told to you?
- In what ways do you glorify and praise God?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'I have good news of great joy.' What is your greatest joy at this point in your life?
- What difference does the birth of this child make to you?
- Share together your reminiscences of past Christmases. What have been the most important parts of celebrating this special feast? Has there been a shift in your understanding of the meaning of Christmas since you began your journey?
- Give nourishment to others this week—not just food but a sense of their value to you.
- Use the gospel acclamation this week:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

*Good News and great joy to all the world:
today is born our saviour, Christ the Lord.
Alleluia!*

NOTES

The birth of Christ is celebrated on this date not because we know it to be the actual birth date of Jesus, but because, in the northern hemisphere, 25 December marks the lengthening of daylight after the winter solstice. This was celebrated as a pagan feast in honour of the 'unconquered sun' but came to mark the Christian festival of the birth of the 'light of the world'.

- ## SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

LIVING THE WORD

- How does your community celebrate this great feast? How will catechumens celebrate the day? Can you celebrate together?
- Use the candle-lighting ritual and light the last of the Advent candles on your wreath. Pray especially for those who will celebrate Christmas alone. Any of the popular Christmas carols could be sung. You could incorporate a small gift-giving ritual for catechumens. Conclude with the prayer of blessing in *RCIA* at §97I.