

The Birth of Jesus: Luke 2: 1-20

The Birth of Jesus. ¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. ² This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, ⁵ to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸ Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. ⁹ The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. ¹⁰ The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

The Visit of the Shepherds. ¹⁵ When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. ¹⁸ All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. ²⁰ Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

The Roman Census (Luke 2:1-7)

We see in the Annunciation account that Mary is the Mother of the Messiah, the Mother of the Son of God. And the Visitation scene reveals her to be "most blessed among women," the Queen Mother in her son's kingdom, and the new Ark of the Covenant bearing the presence of God. Now the story of the Nativity presents for the first time the trials and sufferings Mary will experience in her maternal mission as she gives birth to Jesus in conditions of poverty, humility, and rejection.

Mary's divine motherhood

495 Called in the Gospels "the mother of Jesus", Mary is acclaimed by Elizabeth, at the prompting of the Spirit and even before the birth of her son, as "the mother of my Lord".¹⁴⁴ In fact, the One whom she conceived as man by the Holy Spirit, who truly became her Son according to the flesh, was none other than the Father's eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Hence the Church confesses that Mary is truly "Mother of God" (*Theotokos*).¹⁴⁵

1. Read Luke 2:1-5. Notice that Luke spends more time discussing the background circumstances than he spends on describing the details surrounding the birth of Jesus. In this way, Luke draws our attention to something in the historical context that he thinks is important to understanding the story of Christ's birth. What key word is used four times in these five verses?

2. The Romans use a census to pay for their rule over the land. This particular census requires people to return to their ancestral hometowns. So Mary suddenly must travel with Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a journey of perhaps four or five days on foot, presumably in the last trimester of her pregnancy. Read Luke 2:4-7 carefully, putting yourself in the place of Mary.

a. What do you think Mary is going through as she journeys to Bethlehem for the census?

b. What do you think it is like for Mary to find “no place for them in the inn” and to deliver her child in these conditions? What emotions might she experience, and why?

To Keep and Ponder (Luke 2:8-19)

3. Jesus is born in humility and poverty; but in the region around Bethlehem, God's glory shines out and angels fill the sky, praising God and announcing the birth of the Savior to the shepherds as they watched over their flocks. Read Luke 2:8-19 carefully, focusing on verse 19. What is Mary's overall response to the events surrounding her son's birth: the trials, the poverty, and the humility of the Messiah's birth and the extraordinary testimony of the shepherds?

4. Old Testament Connection: This idea of keeping and pondering in the heart is found several times in the Old Testament.

a. Read Genesis 37:5-11. What is the difference between the response of Joseph's brothers to his puzzling dream and the response of Joseph's father, Jacob (verse 11)?

b. Read Proverbs 3:1-2. What does the father in this proverb want his son to do?

c. Read Psalm 119:11. What does the psalmist want to do with God's Word, and why?

5. Given the ways this idea of keeping and pondering is used in the Old Testament, what do you think it means for Mary to keep and ponder in her heart all that has happened in the events surrounding Jesus' birth?

The Mysteries Surrounding Christ's Birth

6. One aspect of the mystery surrounding Christ's birth is that Mary is forced by the Roman decreed census to travel to Bethlehem. There is deep meaning in this move. Bethlehem is a city associated with royalty. It is the city from which King David came and a city that has taken on great importance for Israel's future hopes. Read Micah 5:2-4 (NAB 5:1-3) and answer the following questions.

a) What does Micah's prophecy say will take place in Bethlehem?

b. In light of this prophecy, how does God use the Roman census to serve a good purpose?

7. Another aspect of the mystery of Christ's birth is the angel's announcement of "good news" to all the people, the birth of a Savior that causes the angelic hosts to proclaim peace on earth (Luke 2:10-14). In the first century, Caesar has been known as the "savior of the world" and as a "son of God," one who has brought "good news" of "peace" throughout the world. His birthday has been celebrated throughout the empire as the start of a new era.

Re-read **Luke 2:8-14**. In light of this background, what does the angel's announcement tell us about Mary's child, and how do these verses of Luke's Gospel subvert the imperial propaganda regarding Caesar?

8. Luke makes a point of highlighting the humility, poverty, and rejection surrounding Christ's birth. This is a mystery that Mary will come to understand more profoundly years later, when her son is taken down from the Cross on Good Friday. Re-read Luke 2:7. Then read Luke 23:53 and answer the following questions. Pay particular attention to the verbs that are used in both verses.

a. What happens to Jesus' body when it is taken down from the Cross?

b. How is this similar to what happens to Jesus at his birth?

c. In light of this literary connection, what might Luke be trying to tell us about God's Son?

9. Catechism Connection: Mary, in her humble maternity, is the model for us all. Read CCC 563 and 725. What does this mean for us as we seek to accept Jesus and bear his life into the world?

CCC 563 No one, whether shepherd or wise man, can approach God here below except by kneeling before the manger at Bethlehem and adoring him hidden in the weakness of a new-born child.

CCC 725 Finally, through Mary, the Holy Spirit begins to bring men, the objects of God's merciful love,¹⁰⁷ into communion with Christ. And the humble are always the first to accept him: shepherds, magi, Simeon and Anna, the bride and groom at Cana, and the first disciples.

St. John Paul II Reflects on the Way Mary Shares in Her Son's Redeeming Mission

“Mary experiences childbirth in a condition of extreme poverty: she cannot give the Son of God even what mothers usually offer a newborn baby; instead, she has to lay him 'in a manger,' an improvised cradle which contrasts with the dignity of the 'Son of the Most High.'”

“The Gospel notes that 'there was no place for them in the inn' (Luke 2:7). This statement, recalling the text in John's Prologue: 'His own people received him not' (John 1:11), foretells as it were the many refusals Jesus will meet with during his earthly life. The phrase 'for them' joins the Son and the Mother in this rejection, and shows how Mary is already associated with her Son's destiny of suffering and shares in his redeeming mission.”

-St. John Paul II, General Audience, November 20, 1996

D. Application

After considering the question for reflection, commit to respond to God in a practical way and then close with prayer

Reflect

Put yourself in Mary's shoes. She is the mother of Israel's King, the mother of God's Son. She is Queen Mother and "blessed among women." Even so, near the end of her pregnancy she is forced to uproot from Nazareth and move far to the south to Bethlehem, where she gives birth to Jesus in a poor and humble setting that would be unwelcoming for any newborn and that is certainly unfit for a king. Mary is not treated the way she deserves, and her royal son is not welcomed as he should be. Yet, we never read about Mary complaining or demanding better treatment. Instead, she turns to the Lord and prayerfully keeps "all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

How do you respond when you are not treated the way you think you should be? When you are not appreciated? When things do not go the way you hoped?

Commit

What can you learn from Mary's example? Name one or two practical ways that Mary's example inspires you to respond virtuously to poor treatment at work, in your parish, from a family member, or from a friend. Prayerfully commit to act on what you have learned at the next opportunity.

Pray

We looked last week at Mary's Magnificat, in which she recalls her “low estate” and God's might. Make it your prayer again this week, particularly as you strive to carry out those things you determined to do above.

The Magnificat

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden, For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.” -Luke 1:46-55

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.