**December 25: Christmas Midnight and Dawn**

**THE CRIB COMES TO LIFE**

Christmas wouldn't be the same without the crib. So, let's put a crib together, and see what the figures mean.

First, we need an ox and an ass to set the scene of a stable, and a stall full of straw for the manger. The gospels don't mention the ox or the ass, but Isaiah does: "The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib" (Is 1:3). They represent the people of both the Old and New Testament, both Israelites and Gentiles, whose eyes will be opened by the child in the crib. They will recognize him as their Lord and God.

This child, with his arms opened wide, is a sign of complete giving of oneself, for love of others. When God became a human baby, he emptied himself of his divine privileges, and became as we all were as babies. God is love. Here is divine love in the person of Mary's child.

His mother is the model of faith, in complete surrender to the will of God, whatever he may ask. She was invited to be the mother of God's Son, and she became the mother of all who do God's will, who hear God's word and keep it.

Joseph, her husband, is a sign of manly trust and fidelity. He knew this wasn't his child, yet this girl was his wife. But he trusted her, and he fostered her child. He believed that the child's father could be no other than God, the Creator of life.

Joseph here is a young man, perhaps eighteen, and Mary about sixteen, which were normal ages for a young Israelite married couple.

The angel, suspended in mid-air, is God's messenger bringing the greatest news of all times: God has come among us as a defenceless baby. The angel with his message is a sign of God's visible and tangible presence.

The shepherds are perhaps the least understood. Shepherds at the time were outcasts. They were known as thieves, and their word was not accepted in a court of law. The gospel makes the point that sinners were the first to be told about the birth of the Saviour, and the first to come and see him.

As far as we know, St Francis of Assisi was the first to represent the birth of Jesus with live animals, and a baby in a stall filled with straw. That was at Greccio, on Christmas Eve, in 1223. His crib featured an ox and an ass, but it didn’t feature Mary or Joseph or the angels. They were added later, following the gospel account (Luke 2). At Greccio, there was only Francis and the child and the villagers, including some shepherds, no doubt, at the Mass.

Francis took the child in his arms and it awoke and smiled. Those who reported it said that Jesus had been asleep in the hearts of people for a long time, until Francis brought the divine Child to life again by his words and example (cf. 1 Celano 86).

Even when they are live figures, the crib isn't alive. If it lives at all, it lives only in us, in the virtues that we embody and in the example that we give.

We have reason to be glad and hopeful, like the shepherds, because God is here to save us.

This Christmas, we are God's messengers, his angels. We announce the presence of God among us by our gospel way of life more than by our carolling.

We have the task to embody the trust and fidelity that made Joseph the worthy husband of Mary and the foster-father of Jesus.

Mary's faithful commitment to the will of God is a model for our life of faith from one day to the next, when we peacefully accept what we can't change and try to change what we can. Like Mary, we are invited to give the Word of God flesh and blood. As St Francis wrote: "We are his mothers when we carry him in our hearts and bodies through love and a pure and sincere conscience and we give birth to him by holy actions which must shine as an example before others" (Second Letter to the Faithful 53).

The divine Child's complete gift of himself to us calls for no less a gift of ourselves to him, especially to him in our brothers and sisters and in any person in need. Let's try to forget our preoccupation with self and give generous service to others. That's how our crib will come to life.

***May you find in His poverty,***

***true riches;***

***in His littleness,***

***true greatness;***

***and in His infant Heart,***

***charity towards all.***