

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle
Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
24 December 2006

The Fourth Sunday of Advent (C)

Brothers and sisters, the ways of the Lord truly are remarkable! He promises today through his prophet Micah that from Bethlehem "shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:1). The Son of David, who is also the Son of God and the son of Man, is to come from the city of David's birth (cf. I Samuel 17:12; John 7:42). Yet there is something far greater happening here than even this divine design.

You know well the story of Jesus' birth, how when Mary "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" (Luke 2:7). This detail, I think, we pass over too quickly each year.

What is a manger? Have you ever really given it any thought? A manger is, quite simply, a box, a container, for food for the oxen, sheep and cattle. Why should Mary place her newborn Son in a feeding trough? Surely something more fitting was nearby, but, then again, maybe not. Says Saint Jerome:

[Jesus] found no room in the Holy of Holies that shone with gold, precious stones, pure silk and silver. He is not born in the midst of gold and riches, but in the midst of dung, in a stable where our sins were filthier than the dung. He is born on a dunghill in order to lift up those who come from it: "From the dunghill he lifts up the poor" (Psalm 113:7).¹

But then why not simply have Joseph hold the Child? Because Mary knew well what she was doing when she placed Jesus in the manger.

The Virgin must have somehow known in her heart what Jesus would later say of himself: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" (John 6:51).

When, in the fullness of time, Jesus came among us and was born of Mary, he

found humanity reduced to the level of the beasts. Therefore he is placed like feed in a manger, that we, having left behind our carnal desires, might rise up to that degree of intelligence which befits human nature. Whereas we were brutish in soul, by now approaching the manger, yes, his table, we find no

¹ Saint Jerome, *On the Nativity of the Lord*.

longer feed, but the bread from heaven, which is the body of life.²

There is still more to marvel at besides this!

Why is Jesus to be born in Bethlehem? It is not simply because Bethlehem is the city where David lived. If we dissect the name "Bethlehem" we are left with two Hebrew words "Beth" and "hem". "Beth" means "house" and "hem" means "bread." Bethlehem, then, is the "house of bread" in which the Bread of Life would be born and placed in the manger - the trough - as food for the world.

It is this very Bread of Life who "shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD his God" (Micah 5:3). He is the Good Shepherd who, because of his deep love, "will lay down [his] life for the sheep" (John 10:15). Through his Death his sheep will be "consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). All because the Bread of Life was laid in the manger in the house of bread.

What is more is this: whereas most shepherds simply lead their sheep to pasture, our Shepherd is himself our pasture! He is our food! He is our drink! By humbling

² Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke*, Homily 1.

himself and taking on our flesh, Christ Jesus "gives himself in order to raise man up and save him."³

Elizabeth, too, must have had some sense of all of this, else wise she would not have greeted Mary, saying, "And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me" (Luke 1:43)? Elizabeth recognizes her own sinfulness and ponders why the Lord comes to her in the womb of his Mother. Let us ponder the same.

Mary comes to visit each of us today just as she visited Elizabeth. Let us be filled with the same wonder and joy as was Elizabeth. Let us marvel at the Lord's gift of himself and cry out with the Psalmist:

O shepherd of Israel, hearken,

from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth.

Rouse your power,

and come to save us (Psalm 80:2-3).

Tomorrow, then, with Joseph and Mary, with Elizabeth and John the Baptist, with the angels and shepherds, "let us also recognize him, let us go to the crib [to the manger], let us eat our Food."⁴

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 12.

⁴ Saint Augustine, *Sermo* 8.3. In Johannes Quasten, ed., *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, vol. 15, *St. Augustine: Sermons for Christmas and Epiphany*, trans. Thomas Comerford Lawler, (Newman Press: New York, 1952), 104.