

### Our Faith: The Christmas 'Mystery'

The chant prescribed for Matins (Morning Prayer) on Christmas Day is *O Magnum Mysterium*, often, and beautifully, sung to the setting by Victoria: *O great mystery, and wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the new-born Lord, lying in a manger! Blessed is the Virgin whose womb was worthy to bear Christ the Lord. Alleluia!* The birth of Jesus, the Son of God, is indeed a mystery. It is a mystery not in an historical or fictional sense - we know and believe he was born - but it is a mystery in a particular, theological sense. This word, 'mystery' means that it is both incomprehensible, and yet somehow, remarkably intelligible. Or to put that differently: we don't understand it, and yet we do! Theological mysteries are 'truth and therefore light for the mind', but the truth is so vast, the light is so intense, that the mind can do little else but be dazzled and amazed when it tries to comprehend it. This should be our reaction at Christmas: to look upon the babe in the manger, and to realize that somehow, the babe is both fully God and fully man. The question of 'how' disappears as we come to a different stance, that of adoration - giving praise to the God who, for love of us, was born as one of us. May we so gaze upon the infant Christ this Christmas and be moved to adore the Lord. *Venite Adoremus!*

### Elements of the Mass: Candles

Candles are associated in the popular imagination with Christmas (celebrated at the darkest time of year in the northern hemisphere), with many churches of all varieties offering candlelit services and processions. The symbolism of Christ as the light of the world is used in the Church's liturgy and ornaments throughout the year, most importantly in the lighting of the Paschal candle from the new fire at the Easter Vigil. Nearly all Anglican churches now have at least two candles on the altar, although it is worth us bearing in mind that until the late 19th century the use of candles for anything other than illumination was technically illegal in the Church of England: one of the Ritualist practices for which our forefathers were condemned by their bishops (and even by secular authorities). But why candles specifically? Assuming that your church uses real candles, notice that for the flame to burn, the wax has to be consumed: Christ brings the Father's light into the world by offering himself in sacrifice and dying on the cross. When we give up our lives in his service, we too make his light shine.

31<sup>st</sup> December 2023

First Sunday of Christmas  
(Holy Family)



The nativity story as St Luke gives it to us is filled with movement. His telling of the Infancy Narrative is highly dynamic. For example: at the Emperor's command the whole population moves to be registered each in his own hometown; shepherds in the fields make haste to Bethlehem on hearing the angelic proclamation of Christ's birth; the shepherds quickly move on glorifying and praising God for all they have seen. And then, immediately, St Luke tells us of how Mary and Joseph take the Christ-child to Jerusalem to the Temple. The whole passage possesses momentum and urgency - it is a non-stop narrative. Something significant is being communicated in all of this. In one sense we are invited to imitate the Blessed Virgin and S. Joseph by pondering these things in our hearts, by taking the more spacious days of Christmastide as a gift to meditate upon the mystery of the Lord's holy incarnation. But in another important sense, the narrative is also schooling us to respond dynamically to the Lord's coming into our midst with equal urgency. His coming demands our going out. Interior reflection is crucial, but it must always result in dynamic response to what God has done in Christ. He invites each of the Faithful to take a part in announcing Christ's presence, in advancing Christ's work in the world, and in applying Christ's victory to every situation.

Today's Gospel: St Luke 2:15-21(CW) St Luke 2:22,39-40(R)