



Duccio di Buoninsegna's image of the Birth of Christ from about 1308 at the National Gallery in Washington D.C.

Follow the Star

Homily for Christmas Night 2017 10:30 at St. Paul Cathedral

Isaiah 9:1-6; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

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Peace be with you! “The Star.” That’s the name of Sony Picture’s blockbuster currently showing in movie theaters. It attempts to tell the Christmas story from the viewpoint of the animals who speak with humor and wit. It’s a movie meant to make the Christmas message of hope a bit more approachable and entertaining.

Yet “The Star” is not the first to introduce animals into the Christmas message. St. Francis of Assisi started the crèche tradition. His first biographer, St. Thomas of Celano noted how much Francis loved Christmas. Yes, Easter is our central feast as Christians. But Celano noted, “More than any other feast [Francis] celebrated Christmas with an indescribable joy. He said that this was the feast of feasts, for on this day God became a little child and sucked milk like all human children. Francis

embraced with great tenderness and devotion the pictures of the child Jesus and stammered words of tenderness, full of compassion, in the way children do. On his lips, the name of Jesus was as sweet as honey.”

St. Thomas of Celano goes on to note that Francis loved going to the small town of Greccio. He had a particularly favorite cell that was very remote and poor so that nothing could distract him from his contemplation of Jesus. For Christmas, Francis directed that an ox and an ass should be available and placed in his cave. He told a local nobleman named John: “I wish in full reality to awaken the remembrance of the child as he was born in Bethlehem and of all the hardship he had to endure in his childhood. I wish to see with my bodily eyes what it meant to lie in a manger and sleep on hay, between an ox and an ass.”

The image of the ox and the ass stems not simply from the pious imagination of St. Francis. Rather it grows from key image at the very beginning of the Book of Isaiah: “The ox knows its owner and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” (Isaiah 1:3)

Somewhat parallel to Sony Picture's “The Star,” medieval artwork gave the ox and the ass almost human faces and human attributes. The great fourth-century St. Augustine suggested, “From the Jews came the horned ox ... and from the Gentiles the long-eared donkey.” It is Jesus – in the manger – who draws them together. Jesus who lays in a manger – from the French word to eat – and draws both Jews and Gentiles together as one people feeding them with himself. This means that the manger of Christmas will become the altar of Easter. Jesus, who first draws close to the ox and the donkey in their feedbox, will – at the last supper – become spiritual nourishment for all people who believe.

Yet beneath the beauty of this crèche and between the words of Isaiah is a hidden indictment: The ox knows its owner. The donkey is at the master's crib. But do we? Who are the ox and the donkey today? Who are “My people” without understanding?

We can begin with Herod whose murderous drive and ambition blinded him to see Jesus. Then – according to scripture – “all of Jerusalem” who stood beside Herod. Add to the list “those in soft garments” (Matthew 11:8) in the words of St. Matthew's Gospel – meaning those in high social positions. Matthew also adds to the list of those not at the crèche as the learned masters of scripture (Matthew 2:6).

Who were there? Moving out a little beyond the crèche with the ox and the donkey we begin to see those who recognize Jesus. First and foremost there is Mary and Joseph – undocumented wayfarers required to arrive at the city of David for the purposes of a census. Roman census takers were the primary way to determine taxation for the empire as well as military conscription for war. That was the point of the census documentation. We also see the “shepherds of the field” – first century campesinos who would have been the poorest of the poor, living as we say “by hook

and by crook.” Many were honest and poor. Some were livestock rustlers. Yet their very poverty and their very closeness to the animals of the field allowed them to see what the ox and ass see: Jesus, the newborn King of Kings.

As we gaze at this crèche we might want to ask: Where do we stand? Are we – like the Magi – still somewhere on the journey of faith, following the star in search of Jesus? Are we, like the shepherds of the field, very near precisely because we are lowly field workers? Are we like the ox and the ass, standing right beside the child providing warmth and closeness?

Or are we locked away in our palaces? Are we distant from Jesus because of our “soft clothes,” our social status, our wealth like those who stand with Herod and “all of Jerusalem?”

If we are honest with ourselves, might we answer, “all of the above?” If that’s the case then follow the star – not the “Star” of the Sony production – but the star of the Magi. Use your reason – your head as well as your heart – to discover what Jesus means for your life as well as the life of your family and your community. Expand your life and explore your faith! Draw close to Jesus – as close as the ox and the ass! Discover in the beauty of this liturgy and the beauty of this night your deepest aspiration to allow God into your life and thus become the very best version of your self, the very best person God already created you to be. Merry Christmas. Peace be with you!