

Christmas Midnight Mass – YrA

Is. 9:1-6; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

-One December, in the year 1223, Francis of Assisi had traveled to the little village of Greccio to pray. High up on the mountain, Francis had a hermit's cave. How Francis loved this quiet spot. He could be alone with God. Toward evening, Francis heard music being played in the village below. Villagers sang joy-filled old songs; Christmas was just few days away. The Son of God, Christ Jesus, would return to earth, a baby, little and poor, to be held in the arms of Mary, His mother. The songs sang of this great event, the birth of Christ.

-So full of joy himself, Francis had an idea. He wanted to do something to recall to memory the little child who was born in Bethlehem. To let people see with their own eyes how the child Jesus lay in a manger with cows and donkeys standing by, the baby lying upon the hay where He had been placed.

-Remember, when Francis of Assisi lived, there were no photographs, no movies, no television, no video games, no photocopies, no cell phones which took pictures. The printing press had not yet been invented. Books were rare and had to be copied by hand; almost nobody could read. No greeting cards arrived in the mail, showing Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus. Constructing a real-life picture seemed a good idea to Francis.

-Living in Greccio was a good friend of Francis, Giovanni Vellita. Giovanni was a very holy and good man, a knight, a man of some wealth. Francis told Giovanni his idea for a Christmas crèche, and Giovanni loved the idea of a living nativity scene. He promised to help. The work began on a level piece of ground, near the hermit's cave where Francis had come to pray. Franciscan brothers and people from the village pitched in to help.

-A manger was placed in the middle. A manger is another name for an animal's feed box. Hay was put into the feed box, as it would be for the animal to eat. Cows and donkeys were placed around the manger. Horses and mules were brought close by. Surrounding this manger, just as in Bethlehem, was to be a stable, a barn, where animals were kept. At last, all was complete. The crèche at Greccio looked like a new Bethlehem. The baby Jesus would be placed in the manger at midnight Mass. Francis was very happy.

-Toward evening, snow began to fall. The ground was covered by an immense whiteness in the calm and peaceful night. If you listened carefully, from far off unseen bells rang out, "Peace on earth, goodwill to all." From the valley, streams of light began to move their way up the hill. Villagers, carrying torches, formed the trails of light, coming for midnight Mass. Singing as they came. A thousand torches ablaze in the darkness, joyous moving lights, arising to fill the darkness. All the while, the snow falls, thick wet flakes. Crackling bonfires add their light. People who were there say the night was lighted up like the day. Just like the light of Christ shining in the darkness, awaiting the birth of the child Jesus.

-Franciscan friars, kneeling, began to sing, "Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice, Christ the Lord is born tonight." Vested in a gold chasuble, the priest entered to celebrate Mass. The altar all aglow with candles, the servers in pure white surplices. The angels seemed to join in the jubilant celebration. Francis, himself a deacon, sang the Gospel, "She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger." The voice of Francis rang like heavenly music, "A strong voice, a sweet voice, a clear voice, a sonorous voice."

-Hearing Francis preach, everyone knew Francis had a special love for God. Francis spoke charming words about the nativity of the poor king and the little town of Bethlehem. His words brought tears; Francis himself was filled with a wonderful happiness. The priest celebrating Mass felt touched with such consolation he had never known before. Francis stood beside the crib, his heart overflowing with tender compassion. Overcome with joy, tears flowed down his cheeks. His friend Giovanni saw a beautiful child asleep in the crib and saw Francis take the child into his arms. The baby Jesus roused himself, as a child does from a deep sleep. Giovanni saw it. Everyone could feel it, the Child Jesus, long forgotten by many, now so close to the hearts of all at that special midnight Mass.

-When Mass ended, everyone returned home feeling holy joy. The hay from the manger was kept. Little miracles began to happen. Farmers noticed, as animals with various illnesses would eat the hay, the animal was cured. Indeed, stories were told of how pregnant women laboring with a difficult birth would deliver safely when some of this hay were placed upon them. People who were sick did the same, and their health returned. Thus began the tradition of the Christmas crèche. The tradition continues till this day.

-By the first crèche at Greccio, Francis of Assisi gave us a living picture of where the baby Jesus was born. Francis also gave us a challenge: to prepare a crib in our hearts, ready to welcome Christ into our lives. Each of us is to give birth to Christ by how we live our lives. We are to empty our hearts of anger or hatred and live by faith, hope, and love. We are to obey God's commandments; we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Each of us is to open a door in our hearts and let the Christ child come in.

-In his prayer, Francis prayed as Christ prayed. The Lord Jesus said and St. Francis said, "Make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is despair, let me bring hope; where there is darkness, let me bring light; and where there is sadness, let me sow joy." The Lord Jesus said and St. Francis said, "Let me be the one who consoles and understands and loves. St. Francis knew that "it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."