

BIBLICAL PAGES

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**Jesus,
a man of His time and space,
shows us our true and full humanity**

**Lectio n° 2
A real-life story**

Introduction

Jesus' Nativity, the birth of the "God who took flesh", who "became incarnate", is related by the evangelist St Luke with lots of details. Scholars therefore wonder whether this 'report' is either a 'real-life' or an 'accurate' story.

This question is not a rhetorical one; it is not pointless. In fact, this search for truth is perfectly licit, distinguishing between 'accurate history', that is, what results from documents; and 'real-life history', that is, what the story refers to, what its message is. In particular, the 'real-life history' is expressed by the events that really took place, as well as by the selection of the facts related, as chosen by the narrator.

Both 'accurate history' and 'real-life history' are present in St Luke's narration of Jesus' Nativity. The basic facts must be believed literally as 'accurate history': for instance, Jesus' birth takes place in Bethlehem. This place is the centre where the story is focussed: "Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judaea" (Mt 2:1). From there all the theological data affirming Jesus' truth derive: Bethlehem in Judaea is "David's town" (Lk 2:4). It is indeed Bethlehem that links 'real-life history' to 'accurate history'.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit:

**Holy Spirit,
do not let our hearts be troubled,
do reassure us in our darkness,
give us joy,
and we shall wait in silence and peace
that the light of the Gospel may rise above us.
Jesus Christ,
You do discern in our very depths
a contemplative expectation:
thirst is filling our souls,
that we may loose ourselves in You.
Who can condemn us?**

**Even if our hearts should condemn us,
God is greater than them.
Jesus, our hope,
through the little that we understand of the Gospel,
You make us discover what You do expect from us.
Jesus Christ,
very often, in prayer
it is difficult for our poor words
to express our longing
for communion with You,
but You nonetheless
have already welcomed us.**
(from The Taizé Newsletter, 2000)

1. Lectio **(to read the Word / to listen to it)**

Luke 2:1-20

1. The birth of Jesus 2:1-7

1 Now it happened that at this time Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be made of the whole inhabited world. 2 This census – the first – took place while Quirinus was governor of Syria, 3 and everyone went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 So Joseph went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee for Judaea, to David's town called Bethlehem, since he was of David's House and line, 5 in order to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 Now it happened that, while they were there, the time came for her to have her child, 7 and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the living-space.

2. The message of the Angels: 2:8-14

8 In the countryside close by there were shepherds out in the fields keeping guard over their sheep during the watches of the night. 9 An angel of the Lord stood over them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, 10 but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Look, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. 11 Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. 12 And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' 13 And all at once with the angel there was a great throng of the hosts of Heaven, praising God with the words:

*14 Glory to God in the highest Heaven,
and on earth peace for those He favours.*

3. The message of the Shepherds: 2:15-20

15 Now it happened that when the angels had gone from them into Heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see this event which

the Lord has made known to us.’ 16 So they hurried away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. 17 When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about Him, 18 and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds said to them. 19 As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as they had been told.

- Let us read the text more than once, slowly and making a pause each time...
- Let us go into the text's depths.

St Luke presents Jesus' nativity through a report that can be divided into three parts, all of them converging towards Jesus' person, while being set in different places and letting the characters have a different relevance, suitable to the different moments and events.

- In the first part, the protagonists are: Mary, giving birth; and Jesus, being born.
- In the second part, we find the angels singing and revealing who the Baby is.
- In the third part, the shepherds, leaving their sheep in the sheepfolds, go to Bethlehem where they find Mary, Joseph and the Baby. When they leave, they start proclaiming what they have heard and seen.

1. The birth of Jesus 2:1-7

Jesus' Nativity occurs in a very specific place and time of history. Generally speaking, Caesar Augustus was ruling over "the whole inhabited world" (2:1). Locally, "Quirinus was governor of Syria", which Palestine was part of at the time (2:2).

Here St Luke's aim is clear: Jesus is born in a specific place of the world; in our own history; in a specific age... He belongs therefore to the history of humankind. And the specific historical-political situation is that "everyone went to be registered, each to his own town" (2:3).

In addition to that, the evangelist defines also the religious situation of the time, when he writes that "Joseph went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee for Judaea, to David's town called Bethlehem" (2:4, 5). The verb that the evangelist makes use of, 'went up', refers to worship: the Israelites used to go up to Jerusalem, that is, to go up to the Temple (in NT's words). Here, however, we do not find Jerusalem but Bethlehem which, after Jesus' Nativity, becomes the "New Jerusalem", the New City where God dwells. All that denotes that – as far as the places are concerned – a change is taking place.

Many other relevant details are to be taken note of in lines 6-7. Mary "gave birth to a son, her first-born". This term refers to Ex 34:19 and to Ex 13:2 ["The Lord said, 'Consecrate all the first-born to me, the first birth from every womb, among the Israelites... it is mine'"], thus implying that Bethlehem's Child is the Messiah, the Christ.

"She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger." The evangelist highlights Jesus' birth in the flesh through the gesture of wrapping the Baby in swaddling clothes, that here pre-figures what happened at Jesus' death and resurrection. In the same way as Mary wrapped the Baby in swaddling clothes

and laid Him in a manger, so Joseph of Arimathea “asked for the body of Jesus... wrapped it in a shroud and put it in a tomb” (Lk 23:52-53). The repetition of the same gestures summarizes the beginning and the end of the manifestation of Jesus’ humanity.

2. The message of the Angels: 2:8-14

The protagonists of this second part are the Angels, proclaiming Jesus’ birth to the shepherds. The presence of the angels shows that God’s revelation is offered... to the Shepherds! They were banned from entering synagogues and regarded as ignorant and trespassers of the Torah’s precepts. In St Luke’s view, the shepherds are “the little ones”, “the poor”, that is, those who are destined to enter the Kingdom of Heaven and who Jesus favours: a weak humankind, that Jesus ‘the Doctor’ has come down to earth to heal (cf Lk 5:31-32).

The core of the angels’ message is God’s birth in man’s flesh.

“I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people”. This joy is first of all for the shepherds, but also must be shared by the whole people.

What is the reason of this joy? First of all, because Jesus is born: “...you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes” (2:11-12). It is interesting to highlight that the Greek original makes use of the term ‘bréphos’, which means ‘new-born foetus’. In fact, joy originates from the very fact that this Baby was born as a real Man.

A second reason for joy comes from the names the Baby is called: “Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.” “Saviour” and “Christ the Lord” are the titles that define the Baby. St Luke thus affirms that this is the Messiah, as announced by the prophets. With the title “the Lord”, St Luke refers to the Paschal Mystery: this Man, being born today, is the Risen One. At the Annunciation, the angel told Mary that the Baby should be called Jesus, which means ‘Saviour’.

“And all at once with the angel there was a great throng of the hosts of Heaven, praising God with the words:

Glory to God in the highest Heaven,
and on earth peace for those He favours.” (2:13-14)

This hymn is a doxology. Let us analyze it...

It is built according to the Hebrew poetic structure:

+ in the highest Heaven	+ on earth
+ glory	+ peace
+ to God	+ for men

In this hymn, men are defined by the phrase “those He favours”. In Greek this is expressed by one term, ‘eudokìa’, which means, ‘favour’, ‘benevolence’. Thus, we must conclude that peace is not for the whole humankind in general, but for those specific men who enjoy God’s favour, who are His beloved. In fact, the term ‘eudokìa’ is used in the Gospels to refer to Jesus at both Baptism (cf Lk 3:22) and Transfiguration (cf Mt 17:5), where the voice of the Father defines Jesus as “His Beloved”.

We can quote also Isaiah's Trisagion (Is 6:3): "Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord God Sabaoth. / His glory fills the whole earth."

3. The message of the Shepherds: 2:15-20

In this third part the protagonists are the Shepherds, their actions and words, after "the angels had gone from them into Heaven" (Lk 2:15).

Let us highlight the verbs which describe what the shepherds did:

"they said to one another"

"Let us go to Bethlehem"

"found Mary and Joseph, and the baby"

"they saw" this event

"they repeated what they had been told about Him".

The text then is concluded by some verbs which denote the shepherds' feelings:

"went back"

"glorifying"

"praising God"

"had heard"

"and seen"

"just as they had been told".

The two series of verbs end with the angels' message being confirmed. The shepherds are confirmed of what had been told to them.

In between the two series, we find two lines to be highlighted:

the shepherds replace the angels and announce the message in their turn:

"...everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds said to them."
(2:18)

Everyone who hears and sees the event that the Lord "has made known to us", can re-live what the Mother Herself did:

"As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart."
(2:19)

2. Meditatio

(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)

- After reading the text, let the Word resound in our hearts...

"The Baby in the manger is none other than God Himself. We can say nothing greater than that, that God became a Baby. In Jesus the Son of Mary, God the Almighty dwells. Let us ponder on it for a moment! Let us stop talking, let us stop thinking! Let us stop in front of these words! God has become a Baby! Here He is poor like us, wretched and helpless like us, a man of flesh and blood like us, our Brother. And still, He is God. And still, He is powerful. Where is the divinity, where is the power of this Baby? In the divine love through which He became like us. His poverty in the manger is His power. By the power of love He can overcome the abyss

between God and man, defeat sin and death, forgive sins and rise again from death. Let us kneel in front of this poor manger! In front of this Baby with poor parents! And let us repeat with faith the stammering words of the prophet: “Powerful God!” And He will become your God and your power.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

“Awake, you who listen! We are in front of the Father of the whole humankind, its new Head, the Second Adam without beginning nor end, from whose paternity the first Adam originates and to whom the first Adam bows with all his progeny. All creatures drink from His sweetness, and they will do so up to the end of time. Now it is the time to know the Christ of the whole world. We all know the Christ of the family gathered together around a pious father and a pious mother. We all know the Christ of the associations and the Christ of the church gathered together around an upright priest.

But now it is the time to know the Christ of the streets, the Christ of the people, of all the people, of those who knew Him and of those who did not know Him, the Christ of the evil and of the upright, of the good and of the bad, of every town and village, of every people and of every nation, of every place in the world. The Christ of the whole world.

Christ is greater than the house-corner where we pray, greater than the hall of the association we belong to, greater than the nave of the church, greater than all the churches. Christ is not content with less than the whole world. The Christ of the whole world was born for the whole world, as He loved the whole world and for it He gave His blood (“He is the sacrifice to expiate our sins, and not only ours, but also those of the whole world”: 1 Jn 2:2).

Now, is it not the time to moan for those members of the body of Christ everywhere in the world who are naked, stripped by sin, by injustice, by the human mind, for those whom the Church has “washed her hands” for? They are part of the Church because – willing or unwilling – that is her mission. They are a part of Christ He is not ashamed of and that He is very fond of, because they are part of His sufferings, of His cross and of His glory! Is it not the time to know better the true face of Christ, who sums up in Himself all that humankind and above all that very part who looks to our eyes disfigured, shameless, dirty, loathsome, with which, and in spite of which, Christ remains handsome as He is, pure as he is, the Most Holy with no spot whatsoever? He was crucified for everybody, wasn’t He? He was “bearing our sins in His own body on the cross” (1 P 2:24), wasn’t He? He cleansed the sin of the whole world by His blood, that blood by which His body is soaked, didn’t He? And we and the whole humankind are His body. “Christ died for us while we were still sinners” (Rm 5:8).

(Matta El Meskin)

3. Oratio **(to pray the Word / to repeat it)**

Out of His love for man,
God becomes man.

He does not look for
the most perfect man
to be one with him,
but He takes upon Himself the human nature
exactly as it is.
Jesus Christ
is not the transfiguration
of a sublime humanity,
but God's 'YES'
to a man of flesh and blood;
not the dispassionate Yes of the judge,
but the merciful Yes of the Compassionate One.

All the life and all the hope
of the world
are included in His Yes.
In the man Jesus Christ
the entire judgement
over all humanity
has been pronounced,
not the cold judgement
of the judge,
but the merciful judgement
of Him who is suffering to the full
and bears the destiny
of the whole humankind.
Jesus is not a man,
but THE Man.
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

4. Collatio **(to share the Word)**

In order for the Word to be like yeast and become incarnate in our very lives, let us share it with the Sisters... As long as we 'break' it, it multiplies and opens our eyes and hearts... and we will be able to recognize Him in our lives...

5. Contemplatio **(to contemplate the Word / silence)**

In silence... we turn our inner sight to the One who spoke to us in the Son. May we be filled with amazement, as we have been so loved by Him that He decided to experience our own finitude, the fragility of our own flesh....

What RM's Rule of Life says

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Following the example of the Virgin, meditation will help you see into the meaning of the Scriptures so that you may be able to discover in them God's warnings as well as His love, and not only in them but also in humankind, in events and in all creation.

"Everyone who hears and sees the event that the Lord "has made known to us", can re-live what the Mother Herself did:

'As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.' (2:19)"

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You wish to love the world as Christ Himself does...

"Where is the divinity, where is the power of this Baby? In the divine love through which He became like us."

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You shall carry out your service in the world as the expression of that universal fraternity which is a bond between you and every creature, due to (...) communion brought about by Christ's reconciliation.

"Christ is not content with less than the whole world. The Christ of the whole world was born for the whole world, as He loved the whole world and for it He gave His blood."