

Christmas 2020

♪ *What Child is this, who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping?* ♪

You can tell it is has been a while since I have sung in church. ☺ That carol, written about 150 years ago by William Chatterton Dix in a very low time of his life, leads us to the heart of Christmas – *a question*.

The birth of Jesus is a fact, an event in time, but it is also an enduring question: *What Child is this, Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping?* Why is this birth both the same as every child's appearance, and also profoundly different from any other in history, before or since?

The question – what Child is this, Who really *is* this Jesus – is a constant refrain in the Gospels. When Jesus is on trial before Pilate, he passes from the expected questioning by a judge ... “Are you the King of the Jews? What have you done?” ... to the deeper issue: “Where are you from?” He is beginning to suspect that this is no ordinary rebel against Rome's power. And at that moment before His death, Jesus brings us back to His birth: *“You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”* We know well Pilate's reply, itself a question: “Truth! What is that?” Pilate could understand military power, the ability to command, economic security, as foundations for a kingdom. But what kind of power is *truth*? He could make no sense of it.

Earlier, Jesus had also baffled and offended His neighbors: *“Is this not Jesus, the son of the carpenter? Do we not know His family? Where did He get all this?”* Even Nathaniel, chosen as one of the Twelve, struggled to find a category for Jesus: “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” At the Annunciation of Jesus' birth, Mary herself had asked – not in doubt but in puzzlement – “How can this be?” And at the literal center of Mark's Gospel, we find the timeless question from Jesus that continues to define our lives: *“But you ... who do you say that I am?”*

Questions. We are used to turning to Google or Siri for instant answers; to science for explanations and causes; to the Weather Channel or ESPN or our favorite blog for immediate information and endless

commentary. In an agonizing 2020 for many, questions seemingly without clear answers multiply. ***But the Christmas question – What Child Is This? – cannot be answered from outside sources; it comes from our souls, as the birth of Jesus also generates within us the birth of hope, peace, consolation, joy.***

What Child Is This? This is the eternal God, come in our human weakness, in the wordless simplicity of an Infant. Jesus was so perfectly and completely one like us that He could suffer and die; and so perfectly God that this suffering and death become the means of our salvation. The birth of this Child is the foundation of an endless hope and the assurance that God Himself remains present in every struggle of life and of history. As St. Augustine said so beautifully, where humanity fell through pride, Jesus descends in humble mercy, born into our midst. This revelation of Divine love does not make us tremble in fear but draws forth from us the natural response we have with a baby ... to smile, to caress, to hold that Child close in love. ***Jesus brings God close ... a soothing, calming, and peaceful Presence for the restlessness of our spirits, God's compassion made flesh to love us without fail and without end. This is the Truth that He was born to proclaim, and to BE – not an idea or a symbol, but God in Person, the Answer to every question. He has come to be with those He loves, and He will never leave us or abandon us in any struggle.***

This Love is given to us over and over in the Eucharist, for Jesus never stops coming to us, speaking that timeless Word: This is My Body, which is for you. Hope is born, peace is given, joy and mercy enter the world, never to depart. The world with its troubles goes on; but so does Christ's love. Take a few moments of prayerful silence in the coming days, perhaps before a manger scene, and hear that timeless question: ***What Child Is This? This is Christ, the King, Whom shepherds guard and angels sing. Haste to bring Him laud ... the Babe, the Son of Mary.***