

Reflection on the Gospel: Christmas Year A
(Matthew 1:1-21; Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-18)

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The readings for the Christmas liturgies vary from celebration to celebration. The prologue to Matthew's gospel provides the first part of the gospel for the Christmas Vigil Mass. The first two words of the gospel (*biblos geneseōs*) evoke the first words of the Book of Genesis and thus locate the child to be born within the broad sweep of the birth of the cosmos. At the same time, the child Jesus is identified as Messiah or *Christos* (the anointed of God) and descendant of Israel's ancestors, Abraham and David. His name is symbolic of the salvation or liberation he will bring for "his people". At this time of Earth's distress, we are conscious of our need to be saved from our "sins" which include our capacity to destroy God's world for selfish gain.

The gospel for Midnight Mass (Lk 2:1-14) comes from the great storyteller, Luke, as does the gospel for the early morning Mass (Lk 2:15-20). Luke tells us that Jesus was born into the world of the Roman Empire during the reign of Caesar Augustus. In his lifetime, Augustus was acclaimed by the people as saviour of the world, son of God, and bringer of peace, albeit by violent means. Luke's communities at the end of the first century would have known the achievements and reputation of Caesar Augustus. These early Christians would have recognised in Luke's story of the birth of Jesus a very deliberate attempt to proclaim Jesus, rather than Caesar Augustus, as the face of God, as saviour of the world, and as bringer of the good news of peace. Luke is a master storyteller. He weaves, from Israel's sacred history and from what he knows about Jesus' origins, a wonderful tapestry of life and hope for the world, a tapestry that unites the heavenly, the human, and the animal world in one great act of praise. The violence that brought "peace" to the Roman Empire has no place in this scene. The peace of Christ is the deep peace of non-violence and reconciliation. It is the peace that satisfies the longing of our hearts.

On Christmas morning, we hear the words of John's prologue. Once more, Earth's genealogy in Genesis 1 is evoked: "*In the beginning* was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was *in the beginning* with God." The gospel then asserts that "all things came into being through him" and that "what has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of the people". These assertions prepare the way for the extraordinary statement that the Word was enfleshed and tented among us. John brings home to us the momentous nature of the birth of the child whom Matthew has named Emmanuel, God-with-us.