

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.

These words have been etched into the imaginations of billions over the course of 2,000+ years. Our etched imaginations have been brought to life with the centuries-old custom of arranging nativity scenes. The nativity scene is one of our most treasured traditions. They come in all shapes and sizes with varying degrees of simplicity or elaborateness but the essential element of them all is the child *wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.*

Another custom which has sprung up out of the nativity scene is the practice observed by many of leaving the manger empty of the Christ-child until Christmas Eve. While there is no “rule” about this needing to be the case, I have always found that there is something beautiful about all of the figurines arranged in such a way so as to be facing a central spot which stands bare. It represents our longing which is meant to accompany Advent as we prepare to receive Jesus anew at Christmas.

This crib has sat empty at the foot of our altar for nearly four weeks now. As these weeks have passed, while doing my prayer in the church, I have often looked at it and thought, “What if on December 25th, it was still empty?” We began our celebration by watching the infant carried forward in procession and laid in the crib. Undoubtedly, it warmed our hearts to see such a sight. It’s like

laying the missing puzzle piece: it fits perfectly and makes everything complete. Now imagine if we hadn't begun Mass in that way. How distracting would it have been to see this obviously empty crib all throughout the Mass celebrating His birth, but never to be filled? Such a sight may have caused us to ask a larger scale question, "What would the world be like if Christmas hadn't happened?"

One of the greatest Catholic preachers of the 20th century, Msgr. Ronald Knox, began his Christmas sermon of 1953 by asking this very question. Admittedly, it's a peculiar time and place to be asking it since, if Christmas hadn't happened, in addition to whatever else would be different, we certainly would not be gathered at this moment. And yet, here we are. Is it possible that Christmas happened *so that* we would be gathered here right now? I suppose that is part of it, but would it not strike you as somewhat of an excessively elaborate plan for God to be born as a baby in Palestine two millennia ago so that we would have a reason to be together at 6:30/9:30 on Wednesday/Thursday December 24th/25th 2014? Indeed, I suspect the all-powerful Creator of the universe had something else up His sleeve on the first Christmas Eve.

The point of asking the question, "What if Christmas hadn't happened?" is not to propose an interesting thought experiment, but rather, to remind us that *since it did*, it must be meant to effect humanity more than to give cause for a crowded church service on a cold December night/morning. Christmas did

happen, and we do celebrate that today, but how much does that influence the other 364 days of the year? Is Christmas more than a day to us?

It should be! Christmas is a way of life; it is *our* way of life. I call it a way of life because that phrase implies something that directs all of our choices and actions. The birth of God's only Son was not meant to impact one day of our year but every day of our lives. In that stable we were shown the true face of love. It is precisely because it has influenced us that we consider it worthy of celebrating; family, feasting and fun are simply *how* we celebrate it; plus, of course, coming here, in order that we might take *our place* in the nativity scene.

I reflected earlier on the fittingness of that empty crib which fills us with joy once it's filled with the Christ-child. But there should always remain another empty spot in our nativity scenes- the spot at the foot of the cradle- the spot reserved for you and for me. Huddled around the manger that night were people representative of every walk of life who came from every direction. At the feet of Christ, we each find a place. But do you believe that when each of them left from there, they merely went back to life as they had always known it? Impossible! No one leaves the manger the same way as he or she approached it. That is why Christmas is our way of life. If we have come here to Him, we must go away a little different than the Christmas before.

Msgr. Knox who earlier asked, “What if Christmas hadn’t happened?” admits that, just because it has, doesn’t mean that the world won’t try and deny it. The *Christmas way of life* is quite plainly not the only way of life that our world proposes to us, but Knox powerfully remarks that we, “...must not flatter ourselves with the expectation that the world is going to find a new religion to replace it. In proportion as the world grows weary of its Christian hope, the alternative is materialism, of a type with which we are already familiar- that and nothing else... No new voice which speaks to us in the name of religion will have any appeal for us, if it does not bring us back to the stable at Bethlehem- there to humble our pride, and enlarge our charity, and deepen our sense of reverence with the sight of a dazzling purity.”

Tonight/today we are brought back to that stable at Bethlehem, but in a few days or weeks, when we put our nativity scenes at home away for another year, let’s keep the one etched inside our minds front and centre in our hearts. This way, we can live the Christmas way of life the whole year long.