

In his Gospel account of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, Saint Luke writes that while Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary “were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and **wrapped Him in swaddling cloths**, and laid Him in a **manger**, because **there was no place for them in the inn**” (2: 6-7). Commenting on the concluding words of this passage – “**there was no place for them in the inn**” – Joseph Ratzinger notes “an inner parallel between this saying and the profoundly moving verse from Saint John’s Prologue: **‘He came to His own home, and His own people received Him not’** (1:11). **For the Savior of the world, for Him in whom all things were created** (cf. Colossians 1:16), **there was no room**. ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head’ (Matthew 8:20). **He who was crucified outside the city** (cf. **Hebrews 13:12**) **also came into the world outside the city**” (*Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, 66).

From this Ratzinger draws out profound implications for us as disciples of the Lord: “This should cause us to reflect – it points toward the **reversal of values found in the figure of Jesus Christ and His message**. From the moment of His birth, He belongs **outside the realm of what is important and powerful in worldly terms**. Yet it is this unimportant and powerless child that proves to be the **truly powerful one, the one on whom ultimately everything depends**. **So one aspect of becoming a Christian is having to leave behind what everyone else thinks and wants, the prevailing standards, in order to enter the light of the truth of our being, and aided by that light to find the right path**” (67).

Regarding the manger and the **babe wrapped in swaddling cloths** Ratzinger takes up themes from the Fathers of the Church and ancient Christian art: “The child stiffly wrapped in bandages is seen as **prefiguring the hour of His death: from the outset, He is the sacrificial victim . . . The manger, then, was seen as a kind of altar**” (68). Going deeper into the meaning of the manger he notes that it “is the **place where animals find their food**. But now, lying in the manger, is **He who called Himself the true bread come down from heaven, the true nourishment that we need in order to be fully ourselves**. This is the food that gives true life, eternal life. Thus the manger becomes a reference to the **table of God, to which we are invited so as to receive the bread of God**. From the poverty of Jesus’ birth emerges the miracle in which man’s redemption is mysteriously accomplished” (68).

Ratzinger continues his exposition of the meaning of the **manger which “indicates animals**, who come to it for their food. In the Gospel there is no reference to animals at this point. But prayerful reflection, reading Old Testament and New Testament in light of one another, filled this *lacuna* at a very early stage by pointing to **Isaiah 1:3: ‘The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand’**” (69). In this context Ratzinger refers to the Greek text of **Habakkuk 3:2: ‘In the midst of two living creatures you will be recognized . . . when the time has come, you will appear.’** The two living creatures would appear to refer to the **two cherubs on the mercy-seat of the Ark of the Covenant** (cf. **Exodus 25:18-20**), who both reveal and conceal the mysterious presence of God. So the **manger has in some sense become the Ark of the Covenant, in which God is mysteriously hidden among men, and before which the time has come for ‘ox and ass’ – humanity made up of Jews and Gentiles – to acknowledge God**” (69).

Ratzinger concludes: “Through this remarkable combination of Isaiah 1:3, Habakkuk 3:2, and Exodus 25:18-20 and the manger, **the two animals now appear as an image of a hitherto blind humanity which now, before the child, before God’s humble self-manifestation in the**

***stable, has learned to recognize Him, and in the lowliness of His birth receives the revelation that now teaches all people to see” (69).***

In the Magnificat Antiphon for Evening Prayer II of Christmas Day we pray: “Today Christ was born; today the Savior appeared; today the angels sing on earth, the archangels rejoice; today the just exult, saying: ***Glory to God in the highest, alleluia.***” May you and your loved ones have a ***joyful and blessed Christmas!*** Be assured that I keep you in my prayers in this holy season. Please pray for me! May the Blessed Virgin Mary, ***Our Lady of Guadalupe,*** watch over you and your family with her motherly care! May the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus have mercy on us!

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