

The tradition of erecting a representation of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem combining the Gospel story of Christmas night from St. Luke with the visit of the Magi from St. Matthew's account owes its origins to St. Francis of Assisi at Christmas in the year 1223 at Greccio in Italy. In addition to Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds and Kings, Francis directed that an ox and an ass (a donkey) should be present in the tableau. The icon displayed here at the ambo portrays the Holy Family and these two animals.

In St. Luke's account of the Christmas story no mention is made of any animals present. Custom, tradition, and piety assume that since the birth of Jesus according to St. Luke took place in a stable it would have had some animals there, perhaps an ox among them. As for the ass/donkey, we might assume that because of her pregnancy Mary rode astride the animal on the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. So what about the ox and the ass? Why these two animals? What significance do they have? What do they reveal about the Christmas mystery? What message do they have for us?

The answer lies in the opening verses of the first chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah: *The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand* (Is. 1:3). A traditional interpretation going back to the early post New Testament period is that the ox deemed a "clean" animal according to Jewish dietary laws represents Israel, the ass "unclean" according to those same laws represents the Gentiles. Mixing the clean and unclean proclaims already at the birth of Jesus, who is without sin, the reconciliation his death and resurrection brings to all people. St. Paul proclaims this divine act of redemption as he tells us in the second reading, *the grace of God has appeared, saving all... delivering us from all lawlessness and cleansing for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good* (Ti. 2:11-14). Again at Christmas we are the beneficiaries of God's unconditional love through the outpoured gift of himself in human flesh through Jesus. The child in the crib comes to open our eyes, ears, minds and especially our hearts to God's invitation to personal relationship. Jesus is the face of God speaking, acting and loving through a human heart in human flesh. He is God who feels our

joy, knows our pain, endures our death and ultimately rises from the grave as a sign of the divine plan for our own destiny in him.

As we gaze at the ox and ass beside the crib, we must also remember the *whole* passage in Isaiah, which is not only good news, but also issues a judgment pronounced on spiritual blindness. The ox and ass have knowledge, are “graced”, *but Israel does not know, my people does not understand* (Is. 1:3). And so the questions Christmas asks become: Who recognized Jesus? Who failed to recognize him? And why was this so?

Historically the ones who failed to recognize Jesus were Herod and *all Jerusalem with him* (Mt. 2:3) according to St. Matthew’s gospel. Those who failed to recognize Jesus were the “people in soft garments”—those with high social position (Mt. 11:8) along with the learned masters in the Scriptures, who while they knew the passage of Isaiah and the other Scriptures, failed (or more correctly, chose) not to understand, with the eyes of their ears, minds and hearts, to become or remain, blinded. Those who recognized Jesus were the “ox and the ass” (in comparison to these men of prestige): along with the shepherds, the Magi, Mary and Joseph.

What about us? Are we also far away from the manger because our garments are too soft and our learning much too clever? Are we so much “in Jerusalem”—the self-built palaces of our personal “kingdoms”, wrapped up in our presumed self-importance that we cannot hear at night the voice of the angel and then set out to *Bethlehem to behold this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us* (Lk. 2:15)?

When we place or gaze at the figures of the ox and ass in the crib scene, let us ask God to give our hearts the simplicity that discovers, adores, and receives the person of Jesus revealed in the little child lying in the manger. Then we, too, might experience what the shepherds and Magi experienced at the stable on the first Christmas night, and like them, return home full of **JOY**.

*(Some material drawn from: Joseph Ratzinger [Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI] The Blessings of Christmas, pp. 77-85.)*

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