

The manger is a beautiful mess

One of the enduring images of Christmas from my childhood is the Christmas Creche (Nativity scene) my parish church would set up as a decoration.

By Christmas Eve, the Creche would be populated with large figures of Mary, Joseph, a shepherd, as well as a handful of sheep and cattle. The final piece – baby Jesus – would be carried up in the entrance procession by a young parishioner and laid in the manger. I remember hoping that our priest would ask me to carry Jesus ... and on the year he finally did (I would have been about five years old), I dropped Jesus on the way up, and broke off his crown. I never saw that particular Nativity set again without feeling a little embarrassed about the whole thing.

In spite of this, I love the Creche. It helps bring the story of Jesus' birth to life for me, but I am grateful to see them both in church and around town during the Advent and Christmas seasons. What I've come to realize, though, is that most of our Creches present an image of the birth of Jesus that comes with a bit of artistic licence. The most obvious of these – the lack of a fourth wall – is done so we can see what's going on inside.

It would seem to me that the most significant adaptation we've made to the Creche is how clean everything looks inside. I've never seen such clean animals in my life! My high school job involved working at a pet store, and I spent a fair bit of time cleaning the cages of the various animals we sold: hamsters, rabbits, dogs, cats, birds, and reptiles. It amazed me how much of a mess that animals can make in a single day.

When you think about the stable where Jesus was born, it's likely this was a place where animals lived or were kept for the travellers who were staying at the inn. It's likely that at the best of times, the innkeeper would have had someone responsible for the upkeep and cleaning of the stable.

But we know that this day wouldn't have been the best of times. The census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem had brought many other pilgrims as well: this is why there was "no room at the inn" (Luke 2:7) in the first place. This could very well mean that the stable was getting more traffic and less care than usual.

In a word: you can imagine that it was a messy, smelly place, not to mention that Jesus' birth wouldn't have had the luxuries most hospitals offer – fresh blankets, warm baths and so on. To make a long story short, Jesus' birth would not have been nearly as sterile and clean as most Nativity scenes make it out to be.

On the one hand, I'm grateful for this: after all, what kid wants to carry up a dirty baby Jesus to lay in a stable filled with the "gifts" that animals leave

behind?

On the other hand, it's worth considering that of all the circumstances into which God could have chosen for His son to be born, He chose a mess. This is particularly poignant when we consider the fact that not only did Jesus come into the world, but He also comes to each one of us to take make His home in the human heart.

I would imagine that most of us might want to use the same artistic licence when it comes to our hearts. We'd want to show off the clean and comfortable parts, like our virtue and the good works we've done, while leaving aside the messiness of our own selfishness and sin.

Mercifully, just as He didn't demand a place that was clean and sterile for his birth, Jesus doesn't ask us to have everything cleaned up and figured out either. And this is an incredible gift that ties in to the very mission of Christ. Think about it: when we bring some illness or ailment to a doctor, we would do ourselves an incredible disservice to hide the symptoms of our ailment. If we have a broken arm, it would not do us any good to show the doctor our good arm, all the while hiding the injured one behind our back. And if we have some deep cut, the doctor would not be able to clean and suture it if we were to hide it underneath a sweater.

Likewise, Jesus is not only unafraid to enter into the very messiness of our sinful hearts, but He enters into them ready to cure and heal them: "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" ([Luke 19:10](#)). This is reflected in the sheer amount of the Gospels which tell us of our Lord eating, travelling, healing, and preaching in the company of sinners – and in the gifts of the sacraments of baptism and reconciliation through which He forgives our sins.

It would probably do us all some good to take some time to contemplate the scene in Bethlehem in all of its messiness, and then to consider the state of our own hearts. He came then in a humble, hidden way – as an infant – into a literal mess.

He comes today in humble, hidden ways (notably when we receive the Eucharist) into what can often be a spiritual mess. Then and now, He looks not for the place that is perfectly appointed for His coming... but for the place that was willing to make room. Twenty centuries ago, it was a smelly stable. Today, it is into our hearts He wishes to enter. May we be willing to welcome Him – mess and all.

"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." – Revelation 3:20

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