

the light sleep, the way be tired on its journey; that truth might be accused of false witnesses, the teacher be beaten with whips, the foundation be suspended on wood; that strength might grow weak; that the healer might be wounded; that life might die.

Saint Augustine of Hippo, 354–430

## Related topics

*For further study:*

Incarnation; christology; manifestation; salvation; soteriology

## Closing Prayer

We praise you, gracious God,  
for the glad tidings of peace,  
the good news of salvation:  
your Word became flesh,  
and we have seen his glory.

Let the radiance of that glory  
enlighten the lives  
of those who celebrate his birth.

Reveal to all the world  
the light no darkness can extinguish,  
our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
in the splendour of eternal light,  
God for ever and ever.

*Opening prayers. Christmas, Mass during the day*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.*

## Christmas Day

*25 December*

### Principal Service readings

#### Set I

Isaiah 9.2-7	A son has been born to us, and his name is wonderful counsellor ...
Psalms 96	Sing a new song to the Lord
Titus 2.11-14	If we have died with him, then we shall live with him
Luke 2.1-14 [15-20]	The birth of Jesus

### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,  
speak to our hearts in the stillness,  
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,  
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;  
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

### Gospel Reading

#### *The birth of Jesus and the visit of the shepherds*

<sup>1</sup>In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: "to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child

wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

[<sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.]

Luke 2.1-14 [15-20] NRSV<sup>1</sup>

## Comments and Questions

Luke connects the drama of the nativity with the wider world-stage as he mentions events taking place in the Roman Empire. Herod died in 4 BC, and Augustus was emperor from 27 BC to AD 14, but Quirinius was governor of Syria from AD 6-7 onwards, so the synchronism doesn’t quite work. However, Luke didn’t have access to the materials that exhaustive research has made available to modern historians. But he also wants to combine things because he needs to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Placing them there at the time Jesus’ birth is part of a shared tradition Luke has inherited (see also Matthew 2.1-6), and because the birth of Jesus in the city of David was important as a messianic credential. We realise that we are dealing not so much with strict historical accuracy as with story-telling.

Following the pattern of John the Baptist in chapter 1, Luke tells us that what the angel announces the shepherds see, what they see they report, and it is all as ‘was spoken to them’ (2.20). As with the case of John the Baptist, the angelic presence and prophecy gives legitimacy not only to the events but to the narrative itself. The opening of the heavens and the disclosure of angelic worship (2.13) establish the interaction of heaven and earth.

<sup>1</sup> *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

The portrayal of Mary and Joseph is in keeping with the earlier narrative. They belong, through Joseph, to the house of David, so that Jesus becomes certifiably ‘son of David,’ as well as ‘son of God.’

However we might construe the manger and lodging, the wrapping bands put on the baby, and the visit from the shepherds, the family of Jesus is undoubtedly among the poor. The shepherds are among the lowest socio-economic level of workers. Mary and Joseph are transient, lacking adequate shelter, like the homeless of today.

No wonder, then, that Mary turned these events over in her heart (2.19), seeking to understand them. Although the shepherds are lowly, they gather to see the ‘son of David’ who is by tradition the shepherd of the flock of Israel (1 Samuel 16.11; 17.15; 2 Samuel 5.2), as was also to be his messianic successor (Jeremiah 3.15; Ezekiel 34.11-12; Micah 5.4).

Is it possible that the threefold phrasing in the ?Greek of ‘wrapped him in cloth strips, placed him in a manger, because there was no place’ is a conscious parallel with 23.53 where there is the threefold rhythm of ‘wrapped him in linen cloth, placed him on a rock-hewn tomb, where no one had yet been laid’ so that birth and burial mirror each other?

## Quotations

### 1

It is impossible to conceive how different things would have turned out if that birth had not happened whenever, wherever, however it did for millions of people who have lived since, the birth of Jesus made possible not just a new way of understanding life but a new way of living it. It is a truth that, for twenty centuries, there have been untold numbers of men and women who, in untold numbers of ways, have been so grasped by the child who was born, so caught up in the message he taught and the life he lived, that they have found themselves profoundly changed by their relationship with him.

Frederick Buechner, 1926–

### 2

Man’s maker was made man that he, ruler of the stars, might nurse at his mother's breast; that the bread might hunger, the fountain thirst,