

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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 Savior, 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." 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 favors!"

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." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

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From the very beginning, Christianity has been rooted in the joy of the Word becoming Flesh and abiding with us. We trust and teach that God has entered the stream of history as one of us, incarnating, that is, in a unique way in Jesus. That God would choose to take on our humanity in the birth of a baby is a mystery that we can never fully comprehend. Analysis and explanation will always fall short, because in the incarnation of Christ, the mystery is both veiled and revealed.

That does mean that we can discern elements and characteristics of the mystery that is so central to the Christian story. We can start where Anglicans find incarnational joy most frequently – with the Eucharist. The liturgy of the Eucharist enfolds us into itself even as we take the sacraments of the Eucharist into our bodies, minds and souls. In this way, we are united with Christ – *bodily* united. Then we go out into the world, both radiating and encountering the deeply sacramental nature of God's creation.

The physically embodied joy that came into the world with the birth of the Christ Child is still in the world around us, if we practice looking for it. Anglicans find traces of God's glory in tangible human endeavors, and

especially in music, literature and art. The arts, like our liturgy, use physical materials to expand our awareness beyond the physical. And so, artistic creations can serve as parables to refresh and supplement the amazing story at the roots of our tradition.

When we contemplate and probe the depths and enigmas of the incarnation, our habitual thought patterns can hold us captive to a story. But we can innocently retreat into predictable perspectives that *tame* our interactions with the living God. Our predictable frames are useful, like the convenience of a computer that sets up every new blank document the same way. When we let even useful habitual patterns harden into certainty, we stifle our curiosity and close openings for renewal.

Fortunately, trusting God's interaction with us through physical materials in the Eucharist also opens us to fresh insights into our sacred stories through other physical means. And that makes the arts a potent avenue for God to refresh or enhance our experience of familiar stories from the treasury of our scripture, even Luke's nativity story.

Some years ago, I fell in love with Sandro Botticelli's "Madonna della Melagrana," the image on the cover of your bulletin. There's no manger, no cattle lowing, no shepherds. And yet, the painting shines with the revelation of God's loving, incarnational purpose.

Botticelli has surrounded Mary with six angels in an elegant masterwork of lines and color—the seven of them filling a biblical number of perfect completion, with the Christ child as the center of that perfection. Botticelli acknowledges appropriate roles by placing the Christ Child at the center of the circle, itself a statement about eternity and perfection. He also provides subtle visual cues.

Mary sits with the Christ child in her lap with beams of descending light drenching her with grace. The folds of her robe repeat the pattern to capture the bestowing of her humanity on Jesus.

Mary's translucent halo nearly disappears in the ornate cloth veil that frames her face. The delicate lace of the Christ child's more intricate halo creates an emphasize on Mary's earthly groundedness, her humility, in contrast to the Child's more complete manifestation of both humanity and divinity.

Though the Christ-child is appropriately placed in the theological center, Botticelli has masterfully focused the emotional center in Mary's gaze. The elegant arc formed by the eyes of the angels moves to Mary at the peak, where we are entranced by her expression. She is at once young and old; filled with both bliss and sorrow; her heart and ours both lifted in joy and shattered in grief.

What words must Mary be treasuring and pondering in her heart of hearts.

In the complexity of her emotions, she turns her merciful eyes ever so slightly away from us. We almost feel as though we are intruding on this poignant and deeply intimate moment. Even so, she is strong without any surrounding human structures or furnishings. God's angels and the light of Grace are her only support. She is the picture of wounded innocence and loving consent.

Mary holds in her hand, gently and firmly, the pomegranate – in Italian, the “melagrana” – the symbol of life that gives the painting its name. The Child's hand, too small to hold the fruit on its own, touches the fruit as if to bond with his mother in accepting both the fullness of life's joy and pain. The Child fixes his eyes on us, hand raised in blessing to us. Like so much of the Byzantine art before this time, the Child has a distinctly adult presence, yet unlike what has gone before, Botticelli presents us with an enigmatic and timeless infant.

Botticelli's painting communicates a sacramental awareness of nature married with deep historical symbolism. The pomegranate, so realistic we expect it to drip from the painting, is opened like two doors exposing an intersection of five lines that represent the five wounds of the crucifixion.

The skin of the fruit appears to have been burst rather than cut, exposing an abundance of ripened, blood-red pips inside as cues both for the many drops of blood shed on the cross and the promise of life they hold. The seeds, historically associated with royalty, also signify Christ's resurrection like the seed of a new plant, and the potential in our own baptism to die and be reborn into the royalty of the Kingdom with Christ.

And so, Botticelli's painting – a physical artifact – vibrantly evokes the deeper implications of Luke's incarnation story. God's grace working through our physical senses us grants us the ability to perceive and behold, the miracle of “God with us,” Emmanuel. If we allow it, God's glory reaches out and touches us, deepening our yearning for the truth, beauty and goodness at the heart of Luke's incarnation story.

Wherever and whenever we are captivated by a display of beauty or seized by a statement of truth or inspired by a glimpse of goodness, we are face-to-face with the Divine imagination loving reality into being. To notice the smallest of these events is to engage the Trinity. And in these moments, we, too, are surrounded by angels singing: “Glory to God in the highest places.” The company of heaven still prays peace, God's *shalom*, for everyone whose life and resolve resonate with God's yearning for all creation.

Orthodox theologian Olivier-Maurice Clément wrote that “the Incarnation needs to be put back into the whole scheme of creation...the Incarnation remains above all,” Clément insists, “the great synthesis, in Christ, of the human and the divine and the cosmic.” In other words, the incarnation we celebrate draws us to the people and the things of this world. Anything that is beautiful, true and good reverberates with the incarnation.

Once God’s glory is revealed to us, embodied in creation, we can see the blush of God’s light everywhere. All creation is holy. Every creature is potentially saturated with the Divine. We acknowledge that glory with twinkling lights and shimmering ornaments as faint imitations of the true light.

Because God’s Word was made flesh and abides among us, we can trust that the Divine presence is everywhere. Because of the incarnation of Christ, the Savior born in the city of David, we can be grateful to be embodied spirits ourselves. We care for and use the minds and bodies God has given us to seek and serve Christ in all people. The incarnation is the reason we respect the dignity of every human being.

And every year, we return in our hearts and minds to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us. We return to the story of Mary and Joseph, and the child laying in the manger. We gather in this place, a place of quiet beauty, to hear words of truth that will compliment and deepen the next chapters of the story that began with a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes.

We come to be reunited with the inescapable truth that no matter what else happens in the one precious life we have been granted, God comes close enough to touch, to hold, to cradle with love. Through the gift of Christ, God comes to us – you and me – to make us into incarnations and carriers of the great joy, love and hope given for all creation.

On this holy night, right here at this Eucharistic table, Christ is made manifest, reborn among us and within us. And so, a multitude of the heavenly host, praises God saying, "Glory to God in the highest places and peace on earth among people of good will!"

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