

Setting Up the Crib early this Christmas

An Advent Message from Bishop Brendan Leahy

As we begin our Advent journey towards Christmas, I want to recall how 800 years ago this Christmas, St. Francis of Assisi arranged the first Crib in Greccio, in central Italy. Francis was very practical. He realised that we need to see, hear and even smell something before it can enlighten our minds and ignite our hearts. So he arranged for the crib to be made ready with hay, an ox and donkey and real living people. It is said that soon many arrived with candles and torches, standing looking at this crib and singing hymns, praising God and feeling a wonderful moving atmosphere of peace invading their soul.

The idea of the crib took off and soon there were cribs all over the world in different shapes and sizes and designs depending on the local cultures. It was said that the hay used by Francis miraculously acquired the power to cure local cattle diseases and plagues. Perhaps that explains the tradition that some people have during the Christmas season when they visit a crib in a church of taking a piece of the straw home with them.



800 years on, the tradition of the crib is still going strong. It is a living Gospel that speaks to our heart, our mind and our soul. Why not, on this 800th anniversary, think of setting up the crib early this year, even before the tree! And why not look around and see if there are possibilities of displaying the crib not just in churches and in our homes, but in our workplace or healthcare centres, in schools and meeting places, in restaurants and sports clubs, in prisons and in homes for the elderly, the disabled, or recovering from addictions...

Yes, because the crib speaks words the heart hears even when we are coping with challenges that seem too great for our mind to work out. What does the crib tell us? Many things, but let's just take three brief points. The crib reminds us:

- That we are not alone in a world grown cold. In the incarnation, God has become very close, very close to us. Jesus is Emmanuel, the God who is with us. He loves us with a love that is compassionate and consoling. Yes, in the crib we see what Pope Francis calls "the revolution of tenderness". God has a human heart. He understands our life situations of need, fragility, and vulnerability. God is there for us so that we can talk to him about the people and situations about whom we are concerned. He wants to share our expectations and concerns.*

- A second message has to do with our family life. In the crib we see Mary, Jesus' mother, gently encouraging us to treasure in our hearts the gift of faith, looking out, even in the face of difficulties, for the positive in life with "eyes of faith". We see Joseph who reminds us what loving with a "father's heart" is like. We see the shepherds who have come from the hills into the small town of Bethlehem to see this great miracle of a Saviour born for them, reminding us that miracles can happen in ordinary everyday life.
- A third take-away from the crib has to do with our attitudes to the world around us. While the crib is a peaceful and apparently simple scene, it reminds us how to we need to convert our minds and hearts to becoming people of welcome, outreach and peace. In the crib we notice that God has entered into our world through the experience of being marginalised and homeless. The three Kings from the East, represent "foreigners" who are at home in this crib scene. We remember too that Jesus took his first human steps as a refugee and migrant. At a time when we see so many weapons being used in warfare, and so many violent images on our communications media, the crib's image of peace reminds us we are made to work for peace, for universal brother- and sisterhood, and that our soul deep down is crying out, "never again war".

Many of us have fond memories of the cribs of our childhood. We know how the crib has the power to lift up our hearts and be enchanted by something greater than our possessions, than our world, than our limitations. On this 800th anniversary of the first crib, let's be grateful for how the crib each year offers a chance to spiritually open the door of our lives and say: "Jesus, welcome, come in, come into my life, into the life of the family, into the situations of conflict in our world".

Of course, as we look at the crib, we not only welcome Jesus in, but realise we can have Christmas everyday if we love one another as Jesus commanded us because when we love one another He, Emmanuel, is indeed among us.

Finally, we can be grateful that in the hectic rhythm of life, the crib prompts us to pause and contemplate. It's when we stop and pray that we realise what really matters in life.

