Dear friends,

Last week Fr. Mario spoke to you about how Christmas took on a new meaning for him in the context of God’s intervention in his life this season, and how his own journey, the fear, the uncertainty, the unknown, how all of it has deepened his understanding of Christmas.

Today, I would like to talk to you about how the Manger speaks to me and how I contemplate the Manger in the context of things going on all around us as well as my own personal life.

Christmas is also accompanied, whether you like it or not, by tears. The evangelists did not disguise reality to make it more credible or attractive. For them, Christmas is not a flight to fantasy, a way of hiding from the challenges and injustices of their day.

On the contrary, they relate the birth of the Son of God as an event fraught with tragedy and grief.

Look at this manager. This one looks like a 21st century birthing suite with golden fabric and shiny objects. As I told some of you at my Christmas sermon, the real manger is cold; the real manger is dark and dirty. That is where Jesus was born.

What you and I miss is the stark reality that there was no room for them in the Inn, that this poor couple Joseph and Mary were homeless on the streets of Bethlehem, where they had gone to enroll their names as mandated by their Governor.

Thus they shared in the plight of thousands of homeless people who live on our streets – Pleasant Hill, Concord, San Francisco, and cities across the nation and the world. Can you imagine the tears of Joseph on that wintry night, the terror and pain that Mary felt in her heart?

And then, the family had to flee to Egypt as refugees, let me underscore that word as refugees because Jesus’ life was in danger due to Herod, in much the same way as refugees from war-torn countries, who are fleeing from violence and poverty. Can you imagine the sense of fear, uncertainty and tears as Joseph and Mary rushed with their child in middle of the night? What could they take with them? It all happened just like that.

Probably the most heart-rending of them all is the cry of women who lost their young children, put to death by Herod whom we call, “Holy Innocents.” Mathew puts it in the bluntest terms: “A voice is heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children.” It is symbolic of the sobbing of mothers wailing at the death of their children to mass shooting, gun violence or to addiction. They say there were more mass shootings than days in 2019- 419 of them in total. So many tears.

Mary and Joseph suffered the awful experience of losing Jesus for three days when he was twelve years old. Can you imagine the tears, the sense of guilt for not keeping an eye while in Jerusalem?

At some point in their lives, Joseph dies and Mary becomes single parent raising her son all by herself- thus joining millions of single moms or parents in our world. Single moms tell us that
they sometimes feel trapped underneath a mountain of responsibility that never allows them to invest in friendships, much less find another companion for life.

And so for me to contemplate the manger also means to contemplate this cry of pain. To contemplate the manger means to contemplate Jesus in the homeless, in the refugee, in the children abused or murdered by the creed of adults. For me to contemplate the Manger means to contemplate the cry of pain and tears of many in our world- parents or those ravaged by abuse or disease.

If you and I am prejudiced against the poor or the homeless, or if you refuse to open your heart to the refugee or the immigrant, then you are refusing Jesus this Christmas. If you are indifferent to the plight of single moms or parents who struggle or you judge and condemn them, then you don’t understand Christmas.

If I am indifferent to gun violence or gang violence, and refuse to do anything, then I am not protecting Jesus in our children or the most vulnerable in our midst.

To contemplate the manager in isolation from the world around us would make Christmas into a lovely story that does not mean anything.

Just one more thing! Animals are integral part of the manger. Just yesterday I read that over half a billion animals perished in the fire in Australia this last few weeks. Does the manger speak to you about caring for God’s creation, to love all of God’s creatures?

The Gospel tells us that the Magi, when they arrived in Jerusalem, lost sight of the star for a time. They no longer saw it. Jerusalem was covered in darkness. The powers that be, the religious leaders could not see the true reality of Christmas, it was dark. They did not get it.

Like the Magi, we are told to go another way- not the ways of the world, not the way of Herod, not the way of those who do nothing in the midst of pain and tears.

But “another way” is the way of compassion, the way of love.

The amazing thing is Jesus is our star. He will guide us on our journey.