

#PERSPECTIVE

Nativity scene: A timeless Christmas tradition

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and laid him in a manger... (Luke 2:7)



The mother, a man, and the child represent the central figures in the story. The baby lies in a cradle made from hay, and is surrounded by animals as if they are on guard. Accompanying the shepherds, angels hover over...all witnesses to the birth of Christ.

The scene is made complete with a star placed on top to guide the wise men, the Magi who travel from distant lands with gifts for the newly-born, the saviour!

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you."

Isaiah 60:1

As the holiday season draws near, this is one of the most cherished scenes we encounter in public squares, parks, supermarkets, and churches. It is an artistic, dramatic attempt to capture the very moment that continues to influence billions of Christians around the world.

Like the events it symbolises, the story of the nativity scene itself is one steeped in history. It is a tradition inspired by religious scripture and weaved over centuries with art, storytelling, and local customs.

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.

(Mark 16:15)

In the early 13th century, it was St Francis of Assisi — an Italian mystic, poet, and Catholic friar, who came up with the idea of a live depiction of the nativity scene. There were, however, significant differences to the scene as we know it today.

Inspired by his visit to the Holy Land, St Francis set the scene in a cave, with villagers playing the roles of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. Live animals were used to give the entire event a natural touch! The display was accompanied by a

congregation where St Francis spoke of the humility in the story of Christ's birth and the scene at the manger.

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness.

(John 8:12)

Needless to say, the event was immensely successful, sparking a tradition that spread far beyond the little village of Italy. Although the nativity that we popularly see today is attributed to St Francis, the idea is much older. As early as the 4th century CE, religious art depicted the scene at the manger, but these lacked the human touch introduced at the village of Greccio.

After the inaugural attempt, the tradition became immensely popular. As Christianity spread around the world, local culture was incorporated into it and by the 18th century, the scene found its way from the church to the homes of wealthy Christians.

Every nativity scene, irrespective of how elaborately detailed or simple, conveys the same timeless tale. From its humble beginnings in a small Italian village to its status as a beloved global tradition, the nativity continues to inspire faith and joy.

Compiled by Pothbhola
Photo: STAR

