

## **'NO ROOM AT THE INN?' CHRISTMAS 2018**

There was this good parish priest, who was respected by his people and by his fellow priests. One year he was on holidays when it was getting close to Christmas. He was thinking about Mary and Joseph, and how they must have felt when door after door slammed in their faces, when they went looking for a room for Mary to have her baby. He kept thinking: *"No room for them at the inn!", and no room anywhere else!* All his life he had been interested in social issues, and this year he was thinking not only of the plight of Mary and Joseph and their baby, but also of the plight of homeless people everywhere. He was thinking and feeling so deeply about them that he decided to find out what it would be like to walk in their shoes. So he put on some shabby clothes and a knapsack. Wearing a hat and shaggy stubble of a beard, he found that nobody recognized him now, as he went knocking on doors looking for help. He found too that those who were better off were less likely to help than those who had little themselves. In fact, rich people sometimes set their dogs on to him.

When he went to a certain presbytery, where one of his priest-friends lived, he was not recognised for who he was, but the housekeeper had pity on him, let him into the kitchen and gave him a piece of toast and a cup of coffee. While he was sitting there in a spot he knew very well, his priest colleague and friend came in and told him to leave immediately. He did.

The priest who went looking for help that year found out far more from his experiences than from anything he had read in books and newspapers, and anything he had seen on television, just what it's like to be a homeless person, poor and defenceless. He also understood so much better than before what it must be like to be a refugee and an asylum seeker, doors slamming everywhere. He also felt closer than ever before to Mary and Joseph, forced to find a shed as a roof over their heads for themselves and their baby. Never before had the Christmas story been so real for him. Never before had he felt so close to the Christ-child.

For Jesus came on earth, not as a powerful prince living in a fine mansion in the most powerful nation on earth, but as the foster son of a poor carpenter, born in a shed in one of the weakest nations on earth, a nation ruled by the Roman emperor, a nation paying taxes to a hated occupying power. When he arrived in our world, he was not visited by dignitaries, generals, or celebrities. He was greeted and visited by poor shepherds, probably smelly and unwashed. In their time and place they counted so little that their testimony was simply not accepted in any court of law. But it was to those shepherds, nevertheless, that God gave his good and wonderful news: *'I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people.'*

The choice of such aliens and outcasts as the first to receive the Christmas message shows that God has no exceptional love for the rich and famous and powerful, the movers and shakers of this world and the manipulators of markets. On the other hand he does have a special care and affection for the victims, the suffering, the poor and the downtrodden. God is on their side.

This vital truth is illustrated by the condition of the Christ-child himself. The sign the shepherds are to look for is a baby wrapped in rags and lying in a manger, the feed box of animals. So within and beyond these signs of poverty, vulnerability and weakness, there is to be discovered the power of love, which is to say the power of God, of Love Itself. The impact and the significance of the circumstances of the birth of Jesus could not be better expressed than in two

sentences from our scripture readings today. The first says that: *'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.'* The second says: *'Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.'*

In a nutshell, Jesus was born to us and among us, so that we might be born in a new way. Born to live like sons and daughters of the God who is particularly caring about the poor, the deprived, the lonely, the lost, the grieving, and the heart-broken! Born to live with the same sensitivity and compassion as Jesus - walking his way, telling his truth and living like him! So the Christ-child whom we adore makes everything new again. He invites us to look at and respond to the hundreds and thousands of needy and broken human beings who won't be having even a tiny fraction of what you and I will be enjoying at our Christmas celebrations.

We can't pretend that the invitation of Christ at Christmas time to get a life, a new life, will always happen at a time of perfect peace, tranquillity and contentment. Here's an extreme example! A newspaper reporter has said that whenever he was assigned to the Christmas shift he always did a story on how many more murders occur on this day than on any other in the whole year. Sadly, what is meant to bring out the best in people when they get together to celebrate Christmas, sometimes brings out the worst.

But we, the gathered people of God, have only kind and gentle thoughts for one another and for all our fellow human beings as we celebrate God's overwhelming love. My own Christmas and New Year wish and prayer for you is that the God Who loves you individually, personally and deeply, and who has sent you his Son, will bless you with patience and endurance, with mercy and forgiveness, and with faith, hope and love. To the max!

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