

## **NO ROOM AT THE INN IN 2016?**

There was this good 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 give birth to 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 work, 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 a beard, he found that nobody recognized him any more, 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 sooled their dogs on to him.

He went to the presbytery, the home of one of his priest-friends. He was not recognised, but the housekeeper took 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. He was told to leave immediately. He did so.

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 is 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 asylum seeker, borders closing and doors slamming everywhere. He also felt closer than ever before to Mary and Joseph, forced to find a shelter for themselves and their baby. Never before had the Christmas story been so real. Never before had he felt so close to the Christ-child.

Yes, Jesus Christ came on earth, not as a powerful prince, living in a great mansion in the mightiest nation on earth. He came as the foster son of a poor carpenter in a dirty stable in one of the weakest nations on earth, a nation ruled by the Roman emperor, a nation paying taxes to a detested foreign occupying power.

When he arrived in the world, he was not greeted or visited by world leaders, generals, or celebrities. No! He was greeted and visited by poor shepherds, maybe shabby and smelly as well. In their time and place they counted so little that their testimony was 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 by God of these aliens and outcasts, as the first to receive the Christmas message, shows us that God has no exceptional love for the rich and famous of this world, for its movers and shakers and the manipulators of its markets. On the other hand God does have a special care and affection for the victims, the suffering, the poor and the downtrodden. He is on their side. This truth, this fact, 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, who is Love with a capital 'L'.

The impact and the significance of the circumstances of the birth of Jesus could not be better expressed than in two sentences from our Christmas scripture readings. The first sentence says: 'The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light.' The second sentence 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 did - walking his way, telling his truth and living his life! In fact the Christ-child whom we adore in the Christmas crib makes everything new again. He does this by inviting us to notice and respond to the hundreds and thousands of needy and broken human beings who won't be having even a tiny fraction of the goodies you and I will be enjoying at our Christmas family celebrations.

I'm not pretending that the invitation of Christ at Christmas to get a life, a new life, will always come to us at the most convenient time. He may e.g., come to us in our neighbour, who knocks on our door for help, just as we are about to start our Christmas dinner. He may be our co-worker dropping by for a chat at work when we are on some deadline over the Christmas period. He may be in the smile of a child gazing at her first Christmas tree, and we don't have a camera with us to capture the precious moment. He may come to us in the fund-raising letter from our charity that arrives on the very same day of our holidays that our credit card bill also arrives in the mail.

I'm not pretending either that that the invitation of Jesus our Saviour at Christmas time to get a life, a new life, always happens at a time of perfect peace, tranquillity and contentment. To give an extreme example! A newspaper reporter once 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 year. Unfortunately, what is meant to bring out the best in people when they get together over turkey and plum pudding sometimes brings out the worst. However, we, the people of God, are meant to have only kind and gentle thoughts for one another and for all our fellow human beings as we celebrate this feast of God's overwhelming love.

My personal Christmas and New Year wish and prayer for you is that the God who loves you personally and dearly, and who has sent you his Son, will bless you with patience and endurance, with mercy and forgiveness, with faith, hope and love. Above all, may God draw you to take Jesus into your hearts with new commitment and new dedication when you receive him in your Christmas Holy Communions!

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