

Room (Luke 2.1-8)
Christmas 2020

The story of Christmas is an old, old story; told and retold, sung and re-sung, year after year its elements are familiar, connecting *and comforting*. And especially in a time like this, when so much that **was** normal has flipped and been frustrated. 2020 has been a difficult year (globally, nationally and for many, personally) and for myself, revisiting this nativity scene – with its cast of wondrous angels, wily shepherds, worshipping animals and exotic travellers, all gathered round a manger where Mary and Joseph gaze meekly at the swaddled babe, is somehow both reassuring, and steadying.

In actual fact, this quintessentially Christmas scene is a composite picture that comes with merging two separate accounts of Jesus' birth – one from Luke's gospel, and one from Matthew. It's doubtful that these characters were ever in that cave or cattle-shed at the same time. And yet, there is wisdom in our attachment to the image. For this whole tableau functions a bit like an icon, through which we can glimpse ever deeper levels of meaning; each of its elements signifying, in a deceptively simple way, the intersection of divine reality with human experience.

Through Mary, we glimpse the necessity of undefended availability to God (*'Here I am, let it be to me according to your word'*); through Joseph, the power of responding to what is (as opposed to how we think should be); through the presence in the stable of foreigners and shepherds, we're reminded that the truth of God cannot be confined to one system or people, and that (more often than not) God's truth is made visible to those who seem least likely. The star symbolises the cosmic significance of this birth – the story doesn't explain or argue for this stupendous claim – it just testifies to it; and the ox and ass (imagined in the tradition) suggest its implications

for the more-than-human world. And finally, the child Jesus, around whom all these elements are constellated, signifying a radical subversion of our understanding of divinity (God *with us*), and a radically different way of being human (open, self-giving, God-honouring...). It's a tender and profoundly inspiring scene.

And yet, woven through this tableau of dense presence (of angels, animals, shepherds, parents, infant, and magi) a briefly noted absence... they're there, because there's 'no room at the inn', no vacancy at the guest-house'), no other place for them. Now, once again, it's only in Luke that we're given this little piece of accommodation information; but this element of our Christmas icon *is* highlighted in other ways in other accounts. According to Matthew, for example, immediately after Jesus was born, King Herod tried to kill him. Thanks to a dream, Joseph and his young family escaped, travelling home via Egypt, but the underlying point is surely that he (Jesus) wasn't welcome. This same insight is expressed more philosophically in John's gospel. Of Jesus, he wrote: *'The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people **did not accept him**'* (1.9-11) – had no room for him. This, John goes on to say, is the judgement of the world, *'that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light'* (3.19).

At the heart of Christmas tableau, then, surrounding the warm glow of the stable, is the looming darkness of a great 'no'; of a resistance to God's being with us.

The consequences of this refusal of self-giving love are all too obvious in our world – where daily we see evidence of suffering, and of sorrow caused by deprivation, greed, rivalry, and a whole range of 'isms. The

consequences are plain to see, but the sources of this refusal, seem at first glance, more mysterious. I mean doesn't everyone want to live in a world where peace and good will reign? Why decline the gift and settle for less? What is it in us that subtly (or not so subtly) squeezes God out, that blocks receptivity to the reconciling presence of love?

Well, again, in their own way, each of the gospels offer suggestions for answering this question. For Luke, there being 'no room' is not so much about a conscious refusal, as pre-occupation, busy-ness and distraction. Remember, Joseph and Mary have travelled to Bethlehem amidst a mass of people arriving as part of the census. The inn-keeper and townsfolk are distracted by a host of pressing concerns. For Matthew, the refusal follows from a more direct rejection of Jesus. When Herod hears of the birth of a new 'king', he senses a *threat* to his own power, and seeks deliberately and decisively to neutralize it!! For John, the philosopher, this preference for darkness over light reflects the reluctance of many to let go familiar, if inadequate, ways of being and seeing – in other words, it's fear of the encounter with truth, of seeing and being seen.

So, three suggestions for how and why God gets squeezed out – inattention, threatenedness, resistance to change. Three very 'natural' reactions to the vulnerability of our situation; we could call them *default mechanisms for survival*. What's special about Jesus is that from the beginning he lives among us, sharing fully this life (its risks) and yet *not* reacting in these typical ways. In the simplicity of a baby's birth, the Son of God comes among us in flesh, blood and emotion; experiencing rejection, misunderstanding, violence, and ultimately, death. And yet, with his whole life, responds only ever with love – being present, true, undefended, non-resisting.

We know from experience how difficult this can be. If you've ever sought to forgive someone who's hurt you badly – to let go of bitterness or a grudge; if you've ever chosen not to retaliate and let pass opportunities for self-justification and self-promotion, then you know how exacting, excruciating is the Jesus way.

The invitation of Christmas is to welcome the presence of God's goodness, to make room for grace and love. Life flows when this happens. Think of the difference made by the unstinting care of front-line health workers this past year, and the impact of the courageous commitment of a thousand fire crews last summer. In my role, I see it often – the effect of people caring compassionately – for one another, for the natural world, for the social fabric; people giving themselves to worthwhile endeavour; working at relationships, and hanging in for the long haul.

When we open our hearts to Christ and his way, to his demanding practice of solidarity and vulnerability, making of our lives a gift for others, we become participants in the healing of a wounded world, apostles of peace and joy. It touches the big things in life, and a host of little things (even today!) – like holding your tongue at Christmas lunch, holding back on that derogatory remark, letting a possible offence go through to the keeper.

Thomas Merton wrote: 'Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited'. He *is* here – while we slept, he crept in beside us. And the wonderful thing, he'll take any space we offer, even the old 'shed' out the back ... and gently, profoundly transform it.