

Transforming Qualities of Music and Food Christmas Mass at Midnight Wednesday, December 25, 2013 10:30 PM Is 9:1-6; Ti 2:11-14; **Lk 2:1-14** (When the divine touches people on earth it is to reveal the beauty of God and the blessing God desires to bestow upon us, but which has been blocked by our refusal to accept God and God's ways.)

Storytelling has had a long history in human culture. In recent years it has undergone a radical evolution. **Modern storytelling is very visual** and the visual centrism of storytelling has started with moving pictures and then it developed with Technicolor and then we have computer-generated images and all kinds of remarkable special effects. All of this is very entertaining, but it's also misleading from the standpoint of ancient storytelling of the kind the Bible and the gospels are engaged in. **Ancient storytelling is not visual; it's auditory.** You have to listen to the story. It's not about entertainment; **it's about insight.** So as we listen to this very familiar story from Luke, we need to really **listen insightfully for the inner meaning that the evangelist is trying to convey to us.**

There are two details, I think, that are very easy to overlook. The first is the last statement about **how the shepherds heard the heavenly host praising the glory of God.** Now we could just dismiss this altogether as a completely superfluous detail, but I don't believe it really is. **Music has always been very important in spiritual experience and religious worship.** At the time of Christ, mystics and charismatics claimed that some people heard heavenly music that actually **healed** them. Some claimed that people heard heavenly music and were **transformed** from being a wicked person into being someone who was holy and wholesome. So **there was power in this.** And I believe that's what Luke was speaking about, this kind of mystical, heavenly experience.

I have myself never heard **heavenly music**, but it is **an important component in many spiritual and religious experiences.** I met a man many years ago shortly after I was ordained who told me a story about himself that I scarcely could believe. I shared that this evening at six o'clock and a woman came up to me and said, "The same thing happened to me." He had died three times, flat lined, and he was revived, but not without having an extraordinary experience each time. The first time was actually frightening, but the second two were beautiful and the third was so beautiful that he was actually angry when the paramedics revived him. And this woman at six o'clock told me the same thing. She said, "Yes, when I was woken up I was mad." So this heavenly music is something that is **very powerful.** I imagine that the shepherds were experiencing something like that, or at least that's what Luke believes that **the birth of Jesus is a coming open of this dimension of God's life in such a way that it brings healing and actually a longing for death,** because this man said, and this other woman agreed, that death is now utterly desirable, and he couldn't wait to finally return to **this blissful experience.**

In a slightly different way, the composer George Friedrich Handel claimed that he heard the music of his oratorio *Messiah*. It came to him out of the blue and he simply wrote it down. That's not exactly the same thing because when we hear the *Messiah*, we are hearing human voices and human instruments, and so on. But it is related to this idea of this **heavenly harmony that can transform the human soul and exult the mind. And our souls have great need for this exultation. We are built for beauty.** It's something the

modern world often ignores, but we are built, we are constructed for, we are designed for beauty; and we need beauty. I don't want to criticize modern art, but I don't think the goal is actually beauty. It's something else. It may be valid. It may be perfectly justifiable, but the goal is not beauty. But we need beauty, and this is often unacknowledged in our social milieu.

The fact that the first people to hear this heavenly music were poor shepherds, of course, also fits with the gospel claim that **the good news is aimed first at the poor** and the marginalized in the world, whose lives are often devoid precisely of that beauty and that order that we crave. And we have to add that today the same is true of billions of people on our planet. The harshness and the brutality we see in the world does not come from God, and it is not God's will for us. This is the message of the angels. So **when the divine touches people on earth it is to reveal the beauty of God** and the goodness of God's will toward us and the blessings God desires to bestow upon us, but **which have been blocked by our refusal to accept God and God's ways.**

The second point that Luke makes is that God's Son was put into a manger. A manger, of course, is a trough. The fourth-graders were appalled when they found out that the baby Jesus was put into a trough. Some of the older students answered the question: Why was Jesus put into a trough? by saying, "Well, there was nowhere else." Well, perhaps. But that's not Luke's point. Luke is not trying to get us to focus on the crudeness of the conditions of Jesus' birth. What he is saying **when he talks about the manger is that Jesus came as the bread of life.** Manger comes from the word *manger*, to eat. **It's a place for food**, and Jesus is the food that we need. "Take and eat, this is my body." **Food has a transforming effect on us as does music.** We are what we eat or we become what we eat. And we know very well that our bodies need certain nutrients or we suffer ill health, disease, or even death. The bread that comes down from heaven **feeds also our minds, our hearts, and our souls with the substance that our inner spirit needs.** And our inner spirit has just as important needs as our bodies, and there are just as much needs—again, a blind spot in our modern society.

We are not self-sufficient. Even though it would seem that's the basic strategy of modern culture to make everyone self-sufficient, it is not possible. We are not created to go it alone. **We are created for others.** We need to be feed and we need others in our lives who will stand by us. And we need the opportunity to serve others and to become generative.

The Christmas story is this: that **God has taken the initiative in supplying us with our most important needs**, the needs we cannot supply for ourselves, but the needs that we can receive from God and share with others. And this is what **we need: nurture, solidarity, and communion.** God offers us this, this new dimension of spiritual health: nurture, solidarity and communion. **God takes the lead in providing these necessities** and invites all people to share the same good-will toward others, a good-will you are quite aware is very lacking in many cases, but a good-will that will provide this nurture, this solidarity, and communion with all with open arms and open hearts. **That's both a message and an invitation.**

So all the gift-giving at Christmas isn't wrong at all. It's quite right, maybe a little exaggerated, as long as we remember the true gift—the true gift—and **realize that the work of transformation, indicated by music and food, goes on for twelve months each year**

and is an ongoing, never ending process. And we need to constantly equip ourselves for the work that God has given us in Christ because if we don't, the world will remain just as it is. As Jesus himself learned later on as an adult, **carrying God's will to others can ironically be very risky.** Why this should be so, is the mystery of evil. But it is a risk that his life, his death, and his resurrection showed to be eminently worthwhile.