

Startling Images and Captives to Misery The Nativity of the Lord **Christmas**

December 25, 2015 Vigil 4:00 PM December 24, 2015 Is 9:1-6; Ti 2:11-14;

Lk 2:1-14 (There is nothing more redemptive or fulfilling in life than seeing people heal and grow and prosper, especially against enormous odds. This is the joy of the gospel we all can share in.)

“So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in a manger.”

Most of us have heard this story for so long that we are no longer startled, but we can be sure that the author of the story, Luke the evangelist, intended to startle his audience. Now his audience would be people who believed in Christ as the one who died on a cross and was raised from the dead. **So this is not trying to get them to believe anything; it’s trying to shock them into understanding really what Jesus’ mission was all about.**

So the first thing that is really odd, and he intends it to be odd so that we note this, is the **recipients of the message**. Now the word “gospel” comes from a Greek word meaning “an announcement of good news,” usually used by, for example, the imperial family to announce that a child has been born to it. Usually this sort of message was carried by officials and delivered to other officials or proclaimed in the public square. But here we have something very odd. Angels are sent from God, not from Rome or from the imperial family, but from God; and they announce nothing to any officials, but to **shepherds**. That would be equivalent to saying that today messengers announced some very important, earth-shattering message to the valets in the carpark, while ignoring anybody with an official status. This reflects what actually took place in the life of Jesus. **The poor really did accept him**, whereas the well-established, the Roman authorities, the chief priests and teachers, the Scripture scholars, not so much—not so much.

The second odd thing that Luke employs is the picture of **a stable**. Now many people like to talk about how inns were communal settings and were no place to have a baby. Well, that may be true. But Luke’s point is there was no room. **Jesus came where there was no room for him**. And this reflects the actual reception Jesus received as he taught in the synagogues and the public squares of his day—**rejection from the onset!** Some support, but a lot of opposition.

The third oddity is the mention of a manger. **A manger is a trough for feeding animals**, and laying a child in a trough is rather odd. Who would do that? Except Luke wants to focus on the fact that **Jesus really came as food**, the bread that has come down from heaven, food for the life of the world. Now it’s a stretch; he’s stretching metaphors. But he wants to startle people into realizing precisely: what is the meaning of this person, this child that is born? **So these images all talk about who Jesus became and how his future would fare and they are much more than mere descriptions of events.**

Now another theme that is found here is also the theme that **there is a special concern for those who are most hurting: the poor, the oppressed, the afflicted, the distressed**. This is also found among the saints. Again, this was news for the people of Jesus’ day because they thought people who were suffering were not favored by God. They thought people who were afflicted were not righteous. They thought people who were sick were being punished. And **much of Jesus’ problems getting through to people had to do with overturning**

long-standing views of who God is and what God is like. And he disagreed with all the ordinary viewpoints. He brought in a totally new idea that God is really for mostly the people on the bottom of society: the poor, the sick, the distressed, the afflicted. Any yet those people often clung to this very belief that held them captive, that in this sense enslaved them.

Now a very similar thing existed in India during the time of **Mother Teresa of Calcutta.** She tried to elevate the dignity of the untouchables from miserable conditions. But many of them opposed her because **they thought she was changing the faith, that incidentally held them captive to misery.** And I recommend the movie that is now being shown called *Letters*. It is a very moving story of this very devout and wonderful human being: Mother Teresa. As a young girl she wanted to be a missionary, and as a young teacher in India she saw her country seething under this strain of poverty and religious and racial conflicts. In 1946 on a train to northern India she had a sort of mystical experience, and from then on **she was determined to serve the least of her brothers and sisters,** the untouchables, children who had no school, and people lying in the streets who people simply walked over. Other mystics have had similar experiences. **Catherine of Siena** after experiencing Christ spent her whole life **servicing the victims of the bubonic plague,** from which she herself eventually died.

Now we may wonder: what kind of experience motivates such self-giving service? Somehow it involves the **experiencing of a connection, a connection between everybody, everybody and God.** We are all one reality. God is the source of everything, and God sustains everything. And God loves everything and everybody. **So the afflicted and the sick and the distressed and the poor are all connected to oneself.** And helping them is an extension of caring for oneself, which we all do, and it's serving God, the source of all things. In the case of Mother Teresa she never felt God again; she never had another consolation, another mystical experience or sense of God being present to her. She felt abandoned for the rest of her life, from 1946 onward. But she did not let that stop her resolve. **She found God in those people around her who were suffering.**

And that's the same thing Luke wants us to learn. Most of us are not called to heroic lives, but the gospels and the lives of the saints can point us to a richer and more fulfilled life. And that's **what God wants for everybody, a rich and fulfilled life. It comes from love and love comes from God and we grow in it by sharing it.** God is intimately involved with all people even those who do not know him, even those who distort his image and who use his name for evil. Yet God still loves them. **There is nothing more redemptive or fulfilling in life than seeing people heal and grow and prosper, especially against enormous odds. This is the joy of the gospel, and this is a joy we all can share in.**

If Christmas is about anything, it's about **seeing the world in a new way, looking at life through the eyes of a child**—looking at life through the eyes of a child, a child **who is needy and vulnerable,** and a child who claims our protection and who asks for our help, and **whom we can see just anywhere we look in the needy and the vulnerable.** And let's not forget the **emotionally needy and emotionally vulnerable in our own families;** they may be a source of pain, but they can also become a source of joy.