

Christmas Eve, 2009; Family Service

This service is all about relationship – God with us – and our story in line with the story of this night. Perhaps you can remember that you have a part of this story; our final Advent banner shows the story moving into our hearts to take up residence there with the expectation that we will be renewed, that God will bless us in this Christ – mass.

Frank McCourt author of the Pulitzer prize winner *Angela's Ashes*, remembers a true story he heard when he was seven years old. His mother Angela was six and she felt sorry for the baby Jesus in the Christmas crib at St. Joseph's church. She thought the baby looked cold and wondered why no one had put a blanket on him. He looked happy enough, smiling at everyone, and he wouldn't complain, he wasn't that kind of a baby.

But Angela didn't think it was right – she was often cold and hungry herself – but she wanted to do something for the baby Jesus. So a few days before Christmas she hid in a confession booth and watched and waited until the church was empty. She knew from her lessons that stealing is a bad thing that would get you punished. Even if you took a penny from your mother's purse you could be punished. So what would the punishment be for stealing the baby Jesus?? But she had to do something before he turned blue!!

When she picked him up she was surprised that he was stiff and not soft like the babies in the neighbourhood. When she lifted him out of the manger he kept on smiling the way he smiled at his mother and St. Joseph and the three nice shepherds with their sheep and the three wise kings with all their presents. She felt sorry for all of them that they wouldn't be able to look at the baby Jesus anymore but they didn't seem to mind.

She had to be careful so that no one would see her carrying the Baby to her house. Then how could she take him inside with everyone watching and wondering what was going on. So she went to the lane behind her house where she thought she could carry him over the wall and into her backyard. But the wall was too high. "Can you help me little baby?" she said.

She thought he spoke in her head, telling her to throw him over the wall and recover him from the other side – it took three tries for him to sail over the top and then when Angela climbed over she couldn't find him. She was not pleased when she finally found him in the backyard of a neighbour but he had the same smile so she hugged him to warm him up as she crept into the house.

She had a BIG secret. Baby Jesus was upstairs now in a bed nice and warm. Her brother Pat had seen what she was doing and couldn't stop himself from telling the rest of the family – he was proud of her. "She have God in the bed," he told them. Laughing they decided to have a look. It was dark in the bedroom but you could see the Baby Jesus in the bed, his head on the pillow, his arms stretched out. "Mother O God," said Angela's mother. "Is that the baby Jesus from St. Joseph's? Did YOU put that baby in the bed? For the love of God!!" "He was cold in the crib and I wanted to warm him up, said

Angela. "We have to take him back to his poor mother, the Virgin Mary, and we'll be lucky if there isn't trouble with the priest."

And sure enough when they arrived at the church with baby Jesus wrapped in Angela's mother's shawl the priest opened the door and there was also a policeman. "What's this?" said the priest. "Tis the baby Jesus," said Angela's mother. "I can see that, said the priest. Here we are the past 2 hours frantic over that empty manger. Who took him?" "I did," said little Angela. "He was cold and I took him home to warm him up." "Lord, save us, " said the policeman. "Should we arrest her?"

"No, arrest me," said Pat. "I love the baby Jesus too and I love my sister." There were the beginnings of tears on all the faces. "Well," said the priest. "Let's put the baby back with his poor mother. When we're not here Our Lady makes sure he's nice and warm. "Are you sure?" asked Angela. "I am."

"When she put the baby Jesus back in the manger he smiled the way he always did and held out his arms to the world."

May the memories of this night keep your heart and spirit warm. May the smile and the open arms of Jesus keep you company all the days of your life. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera