

Christmas Day, 2009

Lections: Isaiah 52:7-10; Ps. 98; Heb/ 1:1-4; John 1: 1-14

With the opening of John's gospel we move from a focus on what happened to a focus on what it all means; we move from the birth to the concept of incarnation. The question of the moment is: what child is this? We are given the language of mystery, the language of what scholars call a threshold poem, how that which *was* crossed over into *becoming*.

Some get lost in details and descriptions – and the need for it all to be 'right' as if, when it isn't right. Jesus won't come unless it is. So we worry about the smudges on the fair linen, the magi and their camels being in the manger scene rather than on their way, forgetting the hymn sheets for the family service, and no person designated to lead the prayers; we become anxious about the stuff that is not as important as time set aside for a new creation in us where intent, hope, receiving is all that matters.

I will use the language of poets interspersed with reflections to help us all go deeper into meaning. I cannot make the meaning for you but I can invite your response as we listen to the responses of others, and invite our own selves to listen.

“Who knows what the facts of Jesus' birth actually were? As for myself, the longer I live, the more inclined I am to believe in miracle, the more I suspect that if we had been there at the birth, we might well have seen and heard things that would be hard to reconcile with modern science. But of course that is not the point, because the Gospel writers are not really interested primarily in the facts of the birth but in the significance, the meaning for them of that birth just as the people who love us are not really interested primarily in the facts of our births but in what it meant to them when we were born, and how for them the world was never the same again, how their whole loves were charged with new significance. Whether there were ten million angels there or just the woman herself and her husband, when that child was born, the whole course of history was changed. That is a fact as hard and blunt as any fact. Art, music, literature, our culture itself, our whole understanding of ourselves and our world – it is impossible to conceive of how differently world history would have developed if that child had not been born. And in terms of faith, much more must be said because for faith, the birth of the child into the darkness of the world made possible not just a new way of understanding life but a new way of living life.”¹

“Christ climbed down from his bare Tree this year and ran away to where there were no rootless Christmas tree hung with candy canes and breakable stars. Christ climbed down from his bare Tree this year and ran away to where there were no gilded Christmas trees and no tinsel Christmas trees and no tinfoil Christmas trees and no pink plastic Christmas trees and no gold Christmas trees and no black Christmas trees and no powder blue Christmas trees hung with electric candles and encircled by tin electric trains and clever cornball relatives. Christ climbed down from his bare Tree this year and ran away to where no intrepid Bible salesmen covered the territory in two-tone Cadillac and where no Sears Roebuck crèches complete with plastic babe in manger arrived by parcel post the

¹ Come and see, Martin Smith

babe by special delivery and where no televised Wise Men praised the Lord Calvert Whiskey. Christ climbed down from his bare Tree this year and ran away to where no fat handshaking stranger in a red flannel suit and a fake white beard went around passing himself off as some sort of North Pole saint crossing the desert to Bethlehem Pennsylvania in a Volkswagen sled drawn by rollicking Adirondack reindeer with German names and bearing sacks of Humble Gifts from Saks Fifth Avenue for everybody's imagined Christ child. Christ climbed down from his bare Tree this year and ran away to where no Bing Crosby carolers groaned of a tight Christmas and where no Radio City angels ice skated wingless thru a winter wonderland into a jingle bell heaven daily at 8:30 with Midnight Mass matinees. Christ climbed down from his bare Tree this year and softly stole away into some anonymous soul. He waits again an unimaginable and impossibly Immaculate Reconception the very craziest of Second Comings."²

“Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree, putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes – some have gotten broken – and carrying them up to the attic. The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt, and the children got ready for school. There are enough left-overs to do, warmed up, for the rest of the week – not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot, stayed up so late, attempted – quite unsuccessfully – to love all our relatives, and in general grossly overestimated our powers. Once again as in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed to do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility – once again we have sent Him away, begging though to remain His disobedient servant, the promising child who cannot keep his word for long. The Christmas feast is already a fading memory and already the mind begins to be vaguely away of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now be very far off. But for the time being, here we all are, back in the moderate Aristotelian city of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid's geometry and Newton's mechanics would account for our experience, and the kitchen table exists because I scrub it. It seems to have to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten the office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen the Child, however dimly, however incredulously, the time being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all. For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be, grew up when it opened. Now, recollecting the moment we can repress the joy, but the guild remains conscious; remembering the stable where for once in our lives, everything became a You and nothing was an It. And craving the sensation but ignoring the cause, we look round for something, no matter what, to inhibit our self-reflection, and the obvious thing for that purpose would be some great suffering. So, once we have met the Son, we are tempted ever to pray to the Father: ‘lead us into temptation and evil for our sake.’ They will come, all right, don't worry; probably in a form that we do not expect, and certainly with a force more dreadful than we can imagine. In the meantime there are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repairs, irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem from insignificance. The happy morning is over, the night of agony still to come; the time is noon: when the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing without even a hostile audience, and the Soul endure a silence that is neither for nor

² Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Christ Climbed Down

against her faith that God's Will be done, that, in spite of her prayers, God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph."³

"So, this is the only truth that matters, and the wise men, the shepherds, the star, are important only as ways of pointing to this truth. So what is left to us then is the greatest question of them all. How do we know whether or not this truth is true? How do we find out for ourselves whether in this child born so long ago there really is the power to give us a new kind of life in which both suffering and joy are immeasurably deepened; a new kind of life in which little by little we begin to be able to love even our friends, at moments maybe even our enemies, maybe at last even ourselves, even God?

Adeste fidelis. This is the only answer that I know for people who want to find out whether or not this is true. Come all ye faithful, and all ye who would like to be faithful, if only you could, all ye who walk in darkness and hunger for light. Have faith enough, hope enough, despair enough, foolishness enough, at least to draw near to see for yourselves.

He says to ask and it will be given you, to seek and you will find. In other words, he says that if you pray for him, he will come to you, and as far as I know, there is only one way to find out whether that is true, and that is to try it. Pray for him and see if he comes, in ways that only you will recognize. He says to follow him, to walk as he did into the world's darkness, to throw yourself away as he threw himself away for love of the dark world. And he says this if you follow him, you will end up on some kind of cross but that beyond your cross and even on your cross you will also find your heart's desire, the peace that passes all understanding. And again, as far as I know there is only one way to find out whether that is true, and that is to try it. Follow him and see. And if the going gets too tough, you can always back out. Maybe you can always back out.

Adeste fidelis. Come and behold him, born the king of angels. Speak to him or be silent before him. In whatever way seems right to you and at whatever time, come to him with your empty hands. The great promise is that to come to him who was born at Bethlehem is to find coming to birth within ourselves something stronger and braver, gladder and kinder and holier, than ever we knew before or than ever we could have known without him."⁴

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera

³ W.H.Auden, "Christmas Oratorio

⁴ Smith, op. cit.