

The Christ Child opens his arms to those for whom there is no room

By Father Daniel J. O'Shea
It's early Christmas morning at the Abbey of the Genesee, just after the 2:25 a.m. prayer of our monastic community. This is the time when all of us go quietly to our rooms to spend a few hours in personal prayer, a time of silent presence with the God who created us, gifted us, blessed us. It's Christmas at this "rural house of hospitality," aptly named Bethlehem, and my heart is moved to recall that Bethlehem babe who has gently invited us to be disarmed of our swords and fears and to come quietly with the shepherds and to open ourselves to the angelic invitation and to the invitation of a Child. I am gratefully moved to remember both the holy Woman and the special Child in a meditation born of solitude.

Long before the wilderness beckoned, or the lame were deposited at His feet or the cross and the empty tomb were in sight — even while He was being formed in the womb — His mother knew that the Earth was about to be shaken. It would never be the same again.

The simple handmaiden took in the world's greatest mystery. Mary understood that hidden deep within her was a message of hope for a torn and violent world aching for a Prince of Peace. In the most ordinary and most miraculous event of birth, the world was being turned upside down.

Mary embodied the reversal that had already begun. This humble Jewish peasant woman of low estate had been named most blessed. In potent words that might surprise those who would describe Mary as "meek," the young, vibrant woman announced the advent of a new day:

"My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Yes Lord, you have shown strength with Your arm; You have scattered the proud in the imagination of Your hearts; You have put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; You have filled the hungry with good things, and the rich You have sent empty away." (Luke 1:51-53).

It all hung on the first cry of a newborn baby. Cracks in a crude stable's walls let in the cold night air and released the warm and quiet cry that was the world's most significant birth announcement.

And in the unfolding of time, the Son confirmed the words of the Mother: Grown to maturity, He announced His ministry. He stood in Nazareth among His people in their synagogue, and read from the scroll of the great poet and prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

The implications of the words hit home. They disturbed, angered, threatened. They proclaimed a new order that was not popular among those who benefited from the status quo, so that shortly after the proclamation, we find Jesus on the top of a hill about to be thrown over the edge by an angry crowd.

The stirring and simple Christmas story reminds us once again this year that the humbled have now been exalted, the powerful have been deposed, those formerly left with crumbs and hunger pangs are invited to feast. The day has come; we only have to recognize it.

Thomas Merton, author and monk, once wrote: "Into this world, this demented Inn, in which there is absolutely no room for Him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because He cannot be at home in it, because He is out of place in it ... His place is with others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst. It is in these that He hides Himself — in those for whom there is no room."

In this age, the simple Bethlehem banquet table is set for a new clientele. Upon entering the hall where the feast is prepared, the poor trade in their shackles for garlands, their multiple layers of worn clothes and tattered coats for robes of righteousness.

At one corner of the table sits my friend, the homeless alcoholic who recently "got busted" one wintry night for falling asleep beside the heating grill in some public garage. There was no room. Next to him is the lonely prostitute who moaned through the agony of heroin withdrawal in jail. And there sits the arthritic Mr. Bell, who always told me despondently, as he fed the remnant winter pigeons: "The richer keep getting richer and the poor keep getting nothing."

Never before has there been such a collection of the broken, the poor and the tortured. From all over the world, with a poor shepherd boy leading them, come the refugees, the exploited, the ragged, the weary — the "holy ones" seeking and creating sanctuary. And at the head of the huge table sits a young boy once crippled by poverty's personal attacks. A large tear of joy descends his cheek as his eyes take in with delight the feast before him: mashed potatoes and tortillas and fried rice, chitterlings and plantains, pork and sweet potato pie. His eyes are as large as the pile of food in front of him.

The weak and lonely, now whole, join in laughter and share the global feast. The lame and broken-hearted lead the festal dance.



Those whose food had been nothing but stark perseverance now revel in God's abundance.

Outside, peering through the windows covered with the bars that they themselves once constructed from within, stand the hard-hearted, the selfish, the complacent. They cannot understand such a Christmas party. They alone are left out of this great banquet. For once, a long time ago, a baby crept into straw and the event was too quiet for them to notice.

Inside at the foot of the table sits a figure with welcoming arms stretched wide to encompass all those seated around. This One says, as if to answer the puzzlement of those who look in from the outside, "You know, I do love justice and mercy and fullness of peace forever — for all people, for all time."

Suddenly, the heavens ring out, filling the stark night sky with the light as the angels break out in a contagious song of delight: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth!"

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Suitable gifts

Don't be too particular about giving useful Christmas presents, notwithstanding that hosts of practical individuals, specially those of a philanthropic turn of mind, are forever advising just to the contrary. Of course where extreme poverty is in question, when the very necessities of life are lacking, a ton of coal or a basket of provisions is doubtless a more suitable gift than would be a silken table cover or an embroidered scarf; but, barring such extreme cases, the greatest degree of benefit and happiness experienced by the exchange of gifts at the season of "good will to men" does not, as a rule, result from those of a strictly useful nature (*Whew! those Victorian sentences!* — Ed.). After all, men and women are only boys and girls grown tall; and, pray, what healthy boy or girl would prefer a pair of boots to a toy pistol or a pair of skates, a doll or a box of candy, as his or her annual contribution from Santa Claus.

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