

First Sunday after Christmas Day

December 28, 2008

Lessons: Psalm 147; Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 3:23-25;4: 4-7; John 1:1-18

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

How many times since our service here on Christmas Eve have we each taken the time to sit down by our selves and considered what the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, so very long ago, means for our lives today?

I ask that, because even though today is called the First Sunday after Christmas Day, it is part of something much larger. It is important to remember that today is not just another Sunday, one that happens to follow the day that we celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. Today, the First Sunday after Christmas Day, is one of the days that we refer to as the Twelve Days of Christmas. It is part of what we call the Christmas Season.

As Fr. Bob wrote in his sermon for Christmas Eve: *"...We truly celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmas. For us Christmas is not just a day, but it is a season, a Holy Season. So it is our practice to continue to contemplate the Mysteries of the Birth Event and the significance of this Holy Time."*

Have we been doing that? Have we been pausing to consider the significance of Jesus' birth? Or have we become occupied with other things, perhaps things like food and snow removal? Listen to these words from the Rev. Canon Ben Helmer, writing on the importance of using these Twelve Days of Christmas as a time of reflection. Canon Helmer writes:

*"This is the Sunday of Christmastide when we begin to consider what God has done in the birth of Jesus. In some homes by now the tree has been taken down, perhaps decorations put away. Stores are advertising year-end sales. Some people have already bought presents and cards for next year at significant savings. In the church it is still Christmas. We have 12 precious days to focus on the wonder of God's love and what it means.*

*"Here are some principal ideas about what the birth of Jesus means. Each of us can find insight in them, and grow in our understanding why the church has held these days to be a festival second only to Easter.*

*The first principal is the Incarnate Christ: 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us.' God decided to enter into a personal relationship with humanity. God became like you and me—flesh. God could have chosen simply to watch and see what would happen, but instead chose to connect, interact, and experience the human condition. Not only that, God limited the experience to ours—no special privileges. God took on the living*

*conditions of the time: the smell, the thirst and poverty, the ravages of disease and discomfort. Jesus was not offered anything better than others because of who he was.*

*“So, what does the Incarnate Christ mean for us: It means God wants a relationship with every one of us, not just a chosen few. God wants us to know we are loved, valued, and worth saving, that we are precious. God wants to draw us together into a kingdom of life that is abundant and rich, that has lots of entry points and that involves many different people.*

These words from Canon Helmer give us a good example of where our thoughts and reflections could take us as we contemplate the mysteries of the Christmas Season. But how might taking time to think about and reflect on the birth of Jesus then be reflected in our lives and the lives of those around us? Listen as Canon Helmer continues and see if this doesn't sound very, very familiar. He writes:

*“The Incarnate Christ also gives us a guide for mission. If God chose to come and live among us and be like us, then our mission is to seek out those especially who are marginal, lonely, lost, in prison, hurt, angry, afraid, and unsuccessful right where we live—and hang out with them. We can be their light in the darkness, and we can experience God's grace in solidarity with them”.*

These words on mission sound very much like the author's words in “Reflections on Messiah”, the book we have been studying during Advent. Clearly mission, serving the world in which we live, is important. And taking time to reflect, to contemplate our lives and the world around us is also important.

So let me offer two thoughts. First, think about our Advent study, and what we have learned about living out our lives as Christians. Think also about what we just heard about mission. Now listen to these words from our Thomas Merton study on contemplative living. Realize how important these words are to our Christian service.

*“Living contemplatively begins with ourselves but leads us in the end to embrace deeply not only our truest self, but God, neighbor, and all of creation. By reflecting on our everyday experiences, we seek the depths of our inner truth. By exploring our beliefs, illusions, attitudes and assumptions, we find our true self and discover how we relate to the larger community. Contemplative living directs our minds and hearts to the truly important issues of human existence, making us less likely to be captivated by the superficial distractions that so easily occupy our time.*

*“Pay attention to the assumptions, attitudes and experiences underlying your initial or surface thoughts on (a) topic. Ask yourself questions like: ‘Why am I drawn to this particular part of (a) reading?’ ‘What makes me feel this way?’”*

As we continue on our journey as Christians, spending time reflecting, contemplating, and asking ourselves questions and verifying, can be very beneficial if we are to truly see

who it is that is in front of us and what is going on around us. To serve others and to be effective “Instruments of Peace”, we need to be present.

For example, let me ask a couple of questions. When you first heard the story of the inn in Bethlehem, how did you picture it? How many rooms do you think it might have had? How many stories? How was it furnished? What were the people like who were there? Can you picture it? Now, hold that picture in your mind and listen to these words from Bible translator and author J.B. Phillips. He writes:

*“It may well have been a very shame-faced and embarrassed inn-keeper who offered Joseph and Mary the only shelter he had available. It was poor indeed but it was dry and warm in the company of the beasts of the farm.*

*“‘No room in the inn’ is a phrase which, if we are not careful, conveys the idea to us of a harassed desk-clerk at an admittedly third rate country inn saying to the anxious Joseph, ‘Sorry, sir, but all the rooms are booked!’ But the eastern inn (or khan) in a village like Bethlehem was nothing like the poorest of moderns inns. And the statement that there was ‘no room’ means literally that there was no ‘place’ or ‘space’ on the earthen floor of that grossly over-crowded little resting-place for travelers.*

*“We do not know who first thought of the ‘stable’ or ‘lean-to’ or ‘cave’ where the animals were brought in for the night, but lowly as it was, it gave the holy young woman, whom God had chosen for this unique honour, shelter, warmth and privacy. And who amidst the snoring or reveling crowd next door could have guessed what was happening a few yards away?”*

Now I don’t know about anyone else, but Phillips’ words: *“shelter, warmth and privacy”* gave a different context to how I had viewed this story in the past. What would having a baby been like if there had been “room at the inn”?

Think about your own life. Are there blessings that you have missed? Are there some details that take on a new perspective when you reflect back on a difficult time that you have faced? Is it possible that there just might be some details that are different than when you first viewed them? Do you think that as we move forward during these remaining days of the Christmas Season, there just might be some real benefit in spending some time reflecting, some time in contemplation?

AMEN