

No Room (Advent 4 – Luke 2. 1-8)

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The story of Christmas is an old, old story – told and retold, its elements like river stones worn and smooth to the touch, familiar, comforting, connecting many of us back into to our childhoods – with its cast of angels and worshipping oxen, exotic travellers bearing mysterious sounding gifts, picturesque shepherds, Mary and Joseph standing meekly by the manger while a star rests over them and the swaddled child. Of course this is actually a composite picture which comes from merging the stories of Jesus’ birth told in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, but there is wisdom in our attachment to it. The whole tableau is a bit like an icon through which we may glimpse deeper and deeper levels of meaning, each of its elements signifying in a deceptively simple way the intersection of God’s reality with human experience.

Through Mary, we glimpse the necessity of undefended availability to God; through Joseph, the power of responding to what reality actually is (as opposed to what we think it is or should be); through the presence in the stable of foreigners and shepherds, we are taught that the truth of God cannot be confined to one system or one people, and more often than not made visible to those who seem least likely. The star symbolises the cosmic significance of this birth – the story doesn’t explain or argue for this stupendous claim – it just testifies to it; and the oxen (imagined in the tradition) suggest its implications for the more than human world. And finally the child Jesus, around whom all these elements are constellated, signifying a radical subversion of our understanding of divinity – a God for us, God

with us, God as one of us, and a radically different way of being human – vulnerable, open, receiving his life as gift for others.

Yet woven through this tableau of dense presence, of angels, animals, shepherds, parents, child and wise men is a briefly noted absence – they are there because there was ‘no room for them at the inn’, ‘no place for them’ indoors. Actually, it’s only in Luke’s gospel that we are told there was ‘no place’ at the inn, but this element of our Christmas icon is emphasised in other ways by Matthew and John. According to Matthew, immediately after Jesus is born, King Herod seeks to kill him and Joseph is warned in a dream to escape with his young family into Egypt. And the same insight is expressed more philosophically by John. Of Jesus, he wrote: ‘The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him’ (John 1. 9-11). This, John goes on to say, is the judgement of the world, ‘that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light’ (John 3. 19).

So from the very beginning of the story of Jesus, the gospels want us to know, God was (and is) not welcome here – we like our world self-enclosed, we do not want a rupture in the system, we are frightened of what the call to live differently might mean for us and cost us – and so we squeeze God out – of the inn, of the city, of our lives. At the heart of the Christmas tableau, despite Mary’s obedience and all the pretty angels, is the looming darkness of a great ‘no’, a resistance to this life of God, which is offered to us as gift and yet so often seems to us a threat.

In some of the events of our last 10 days or so, it’s easy to point to consequences of this great ‘no’. In the merciless slaughter of children and teachers in Pakistan, another kidnapping of women and children in Nigeria, in the Sydney seige, and in hundreds of thousands of unreported instances of cruelty, disregard, violence, and greed, the human family – indeed the whole created world – is suffering from refusals of love and compassion, justice and solidarity. So the consequences are all

too obvious. But the sources of this refusal, this 'no' to giving God place in our lives, seem at first glance profoundly mysterious – don't we all want to live in a world where peace, joy and good will reign? What is it in us that so often squeezes God out, that finds no room, refuses the gift ... that settles for so much less? What gets in our way, in your way – of being human the way Jesus is human, utterly receptive to the healing, life-delighting, life-generating love of God?

The gospels suggest, each in their own way, responses to this question. For Luke, there being 'no room' is not so much about conscious refusal, as pre-occupation, busy-ness and distraction. Ring any bells?? Remember, Joseph and Mary have travelled to Bethlehem amidst a great mass of people to take part in the census. From the point of view of the inn-keeper they are invisible. They and their child are, literally, crowded out by what appear to be more urgent, more pressing matters. For Matthew, the refusal of place for Jesus follows from a more direct rejection and intention to expel. King Herod senses a threat to his power and the way he wields it when he hears of the birth of a new 'king'. For John, there's a different take again – 'no room' for Jesus in the world follows simply from reluctance to let go familiar and compromised ways of being. It's the refusal to be changed by encounter with God – fear of the light. And maybe we recognise ourselves in one or all of these responses – in fact, who of us doesn't? Inattention, aggression in the face of threat, resistance to change. And underneath them all, one way or another, is our hurt, our dividedness and fear.

We know from experience that the natural human responses to being hurt are to shut down or lash out, to protect ourselves or seek vengeance. Yet just here lie the roots of so much of the violence and alienation that bedevil our world. The thing about Jesus is that he radically subverts these natural human ways of managing, surviving, and displacing our pain onto others. He comes among us as vulnerable as we ourselves are, as a child; he lives with us, as exposed to rejection, misunderstanding, violence and, ultimately, death. And with his whole life, witnesses

to the possibility of living amidst of the pains and terrors of this world responding only ever with love.

We know for ourselves how painful this is – if you’ve ever sought to forgive someone who has hurt you badly, or to let go bitterness or a grudge; if you’ve ever chosen not to render evil for evil, or to let pass opportunities for self-promotion or self-justification, or tried to engage conflict with patience and generosity, you know how excruciating is Jesus’ way and how little we succeed in giving ourselves to it out of our own resources.

Discipleship of Jesus is about so letting him into our lives that we too grow in the grace to love instead of hate or turn away, that we too grow in freedom from the compulsion to defend ourselves or retaliate. We know the life and healing that flows when we let this happen, when we let go our frightened grip. Think how the spontaneous ‘I’ll ride with you’ movement has brought hope in a time that threatens despair. And I see it over and over again – watching people care for those who are sick, with tenderness and compassion; people making room for the difficult members of a community, people reaching out to those who grieve.

When we open our hearts to Christ and his way, to his counter-intuitive and demanding practice of solidarity and vulnerability, making of our lives a gift for others, we become with him part of the healing of the wounded world, apostles of peace and joy. It touches the big things in life – but it’s also a whole lot of little things – making room for love, opening a different kind of space, with simple gestures – like holding your tongue and counting to 10 at Christmas lunch, holding back on that derogatory remark that could so easily be inserted, letting that moment of possible offence go through to the keeper.

Thomas Merton wrote: ‘Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited’.

He is here – he has come. He’ll take any space you give him ... and transform it.