

No Room (Luke 2. 1-14)

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

In the figure of Mary, we glimpse the necessity of wholehearted availability for God; in Joseph, we see the wisdom of responding to things as they are (rather than as we think they should be) – we, who spend so much energy resisting reality. The presence of foreigners and shepherds affirms that the truth of God cannot be confined to one system, race, caste or class of people; and that more often than not it’s made visible to those who seem least likely. The star symbolises the cosmic connection and significance of this birth and the oxen (imagined by tradition) intimate its implications for the more than human world. And at the centre, the child Jesus, the One around whom all these meanings constellate. In his vulnerability and humility, his infancy and dependence, Jesus radically subverts our tendency to project onto God our fantasies of dominion and imperium. This is God with us, God as one of us – undefended and wholly given – for the life of all.

It’s a beautiful tableau of dense presence. Yet woven through it – a briefly noted absence. They’re all gathered there in the stable – angels, animals, parents,

child, shepherds and magi – because there was no place for them indoors. And though, it's only in Luke's gospel we're explicitly told there was no room at the inn, this element of our Christmas icon is expressed in other ways by Matthew and John. On Matthew's account, 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. The same dynamic is depicted more philosophically by John. 'The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world', John writes. '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 Jesus' story, the gospels want us to know, that he 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 Christ's call to live differently might mean for us and cost us – and so we squeeze him out – out of the inn, out of the city, out of our lives. At the heart of the Christmas icon, 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 as gift and yet so often occurs to us as threat.

In the events of our world, it's easy to point to consequences of this 'no'. The merciless slaughter of war and the persecution of the other; the unheeding destruction of the life of earth and myriad instances of cruelty, disregard, violence, rape and greed. The human family – indeed the whole created world – suffers the consequences of our refusals of love and compassion, justice and solidarity. And yet, it seems to me there's a sense in which this 'no' is 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 makes no room, refuses the gift? What stops us being human the way Jesus is human, utterly receptive to and sharing of the life-delighting, life-generating love of God?

Each gospel suggests a response to this question. For Luke, there being 'no room' seems not so much about conscious refusal, as pre-occupation, inattention and overwhelm. 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, maybe it's just too late; they're one more demand he can't accommodate. They and the child are, literally, crowded out by what appear to be more urgent, more pressing issues. For Matthew, on the other hand, the refusal to welcome 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', and he cannot stand it. For John, there's a different take again. He connects there being 'no room' for Jesus in our world to the fact that we've become accustomed to less than truth, less than goodness. We fear the light, exposure. And maybe you recognise yourself in one or more of these ways of closing God out. Overwhelm, inattention, the will to dominate, cynicism, callousness, fear, illusion and resistance to change. Yet herein lie the roots of so much of the violence and alienation bedeviling our world.

The thing about Jesus is that from the beginning, he manifests a radically different way of being. 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 yet with his whole life, he witnesses to the possibility of living amidst of the pains and terrors of this world not defensively, not aggressively, but responding only ever with love.

We know how difficult this is. If you've ever chosen not to render evil for evil, or let pass opportunities for self-promotion or self-justification; if you've ever sought to forgive someone who's hurt you badly, or to let go bitterness or a grudge; if you've tried to engage conflict with patience and generosity, or to look truthfully at your own destructive habits of being, you know how the human ego rebels against Jesus' way. Discipleship is about so letting him into our lives that we too grow in the grace to love instead of hate or turn away, we too grow in freedom from the

compulsion to defend ourselves or retaliate for wrong. We *know* the life and healing that flows when we let this happen, when we let go our frightened grip. In our WCCM community, I think of the Ukrainian meditators witnessing to the possibility of love in the time of war; I think of the Joy of Encounter retreats in the UK which generate solidarity between those living on the margins and the wider community; I think of the growth around the world in groups for refugees, and for people who've suffered domestic violence and other forms of trauma.

When we open our hearts to Christ and his way, to his counter-intuitive, courageous, vulnerable, generous, generative practice of solidarity, 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. This 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 pass by.

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 enter any space you give him ... and transform it.