

We Christians spend so much time getting prepared for Christmas, it is easy for us, when the day finally arrives, to overlook the deep personal significance of what it is exactly that we have been preparing for. The event we are remembering today is told to us in the beautiful and very familiar story of the birth of Jesus from Luke's gospel. We read it on Christmas Eve as well. It is a story like no other story, and well worth repeating.

It is the story of how God comes into our lives in the most remarkable and meaningful way imaginable ... as a human being; it is the story of God becoming one of us. It is an idea almost too amazing to grasp, that God, the divine creator, became one of us.

Obviously, we can never be entirely certain of the facts of Jesus's birth at Bethlehem. Even the gospel accounts differ on some of the details. But that is not important, because the gospel writers are not interested primarily in the facts of the birth. What really matters for them, and should matter most for us, is the significance, the meaning, of Jesus's birth.

I once heard it explained this way: the people who love us are not interested primarily in the facts or circumstances of our births, such as where or when we were born. Instead, they are interested in what it meant to them when we were born, and how because of our birth the world for them was never the same again. Our birth caused the lives of others to be given a new significance.

So too with the birth of Jesus – the details do not matter all that much. What matters is that when Jesus was born, the whole course of human history changed. That is an undeniable fact. Think of it: art, music, literature, our culture itself, our political institutions, our whole understanding of ourselves and our world changed because of Jesus entering the world. It is impossible to conceive of how differently world history would have developed if that child, Jesus, had not been born.

More than that, beyond attempting to grasp the multitude of ways that Jesus, as God among us, changed the world, we need to ask ourselves, on Christmas of all days, how exactly that birth changed us; changed our lives.

As I mentioned at our Christmas Eve worship service, I hope that today you will set aside a little time, if only a few minutes, to ask yourself how your life has been affected by your decision to accept the amazing truth that God came into the world so long ago as a baby at Bethlehem. All of us know people – they could be our friends, neighbours, co-workers, family members – who have chosen not to believe the story of God joining us in human form as Jesus. You might have thoughts about how their decision not to accept the Christian account of the divinity of Jesus has in turn influenced their approach to life.

Regardless, on today, of all days, take the time to ask and to answer the question, “how has my acceptance of the story of the birth of the Christ child at Bethlehem shaped my life in a very real and tangible way?” If we don't do that, we largely miss the point behind all our preparations for Christmas.

Let me look at just one part of the story of Jesus's birth. Maybe doing so will help all of us to see a bit more clearly how the story can change us. It is the part where we are told that “Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

That phrase, “no room in the inn”, has become part of our language. It is a common expression referring to a lack of hospitality. Instead of a room, the Holy family is given a manger, which we just assume was in a stable, although we cannot know for certain. The implication is that Mary and Joseph were turned away, refused comfort, at their time of great need. It is this theme of the abandoned, rejected, disadvantaged, unfairly treated Holy

family, just as Mary was about to give birth, about which countless images have been painted, countless stories told, countless sermons preached, countless scenes in Sunday School pageants played out.

Figuring prominently in our traditional telling of the story is a man. We do not know his name. We refer to him simply as “the innkeeper.” He is not mentioned in scripture. We have invented him, and he is, oddly enough, a person with whom we all can identify. The story of the birth of Christ is hardly ever told without including him.

Countless generations of children and adults are quite certain what the innkeeper said. For the past 2,000 years we have assumed that he said, “No.” In answer to the tired couples’ request for a place in the inn, he must have said “No.”

We can identify with this nameless innkeeper because we have had our times of saying “No” to others when we know we should have said “Yes.” We have had our times of being told “No” by others, when in fairness we should have been told “Yes.”

Today, I would like to suggest that there is another way of looking at the actions of that unknown Bethlehem innkeeper. To do that, we need to think about what inns were like in the time of Mary and Joseph. They often were built around a central courtyard. An inn in Jesus’ Bethlehem would have had no rooms as we understand them: no beds; no privacy; no toilet facilities; no comforts of any kind. An inn was little more than an open area surrounded by a protecting wall with gates that would be closed as darkness fell. Travelers would enter through the gates and stake out their space in the courtyard until the last square foot of ground was occupied. Add into the mix the animals that accompanied travelers and we have some concept of the unpleasantness of the so-called inn on the night Joseph and Mary arrived looking for shelter. It was no place for a young woman in her late stages of pregnancy.

Therefore, is it possible that we should think a little differently about the unfortunate innkeeper whose task it was to preside over this weary, cramped, volatile mass of human beings and livestock. Perhaps now we can better appreciate what the innkeeper was up against when Mary and Joseph appeared at his door.

Bethlehem, I am told, is built on a ridge of rock, and that ridge is riddled with caves. Those caves have always provided human beings with shelter, and to this day they are warm in winter and cool in summers. The caves were also used as chapels by some of the first Christians. For the earliest Christians the cave was not a place of rejection; it was a place of hospitality, spirituality, nurture, and security.

When we think of Mary and Joseph being turned away from the imagined comforts of an inn, we think of them being denied a place of warmth and comfort and being forced to endure the bleakness and misery of a manger or a cave. Maybe we have got it wrong.

Maybe we should look at the innkeeper in a different light. He sees a young woman, Mary, who is within hours of giving birth. He looks behind him at the heaving mass of humanity and animals jammed into the open courtyard of the inn. Wondering how he can help since the inn is full, he remembers the security and warmth of the caves below the ridge, and he urges Mary and Joseph to take refuge there for the night. Maybe, Joseph blessed the man for his act of kindness. If he did, it might be the only blessing anyone has granted the possibly misunderstood innkeeper these past 2,000 years.

Here is the point: all of us are called to be an innkeeper to whom Christ comes. Our personal life too often is like the inn – it is desperately overcrowded. Overcrowded with our plans, our hopes, our fears, and our distractions too many to number. As a result, too often we close the gates of

our inn – our soul – to God, and to others. But if we are prepared to play the part of the innkeeper, as that unknown man of long-ago possibly played it, then we need to realize that there is always a place, a welcoming place, for the Christ who is seeking to be born in us.

There was a German theologian named Meister Eckhart who expressed this best 800 years ago when he asked, “What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son, if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?” His question sums up well the purpose of all our preparations for Christmas, which is to prepare ourselves to be, in some small yet personal way, a carrier of Jesus Christ into the world. Preparing ourselves to let the world see some little piece of Jesus Christ in us, through our words and through our actions.

I pray that this Christmas all of us are awakened to a clearer understanding of what it means for us as Christians to keep the Christ in Christmas. And I pray that we make more room for God in our lives by allowing the spirit and love of the Christ child to be born anew in us today, and tomorrow, and every day thereafter, in some real and recognizable way. **Amen.**

Christmas Day

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