THE FEAST OF CHRISTMAS
December 24-25th, 2013
Lk 2, 1-14
THE STORY AND THE MESSAGE

HE WHO IS DIVINE
COMES TO THE MANGER
JUST AS HE IS

WE WHO ARE MORTAL
COME TO THE MANGER
JUST AS WE ARE

SO WE MAY BECOME
JUST AS HE IS

Christmas greeting from the Abbey of the Genesee

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Christmas isn’t a time to talk dogmas. It is a time to tell a story....

We have just two stories of Christmas in Scripture: one from Matthew and one from Luke. It is true that they have few details in common. But they are giving us the same message.

What is their message? What is the real Christmas story?

God-in-Christ slips unnoticed into a world of brutal rulers and hard pressed refugees. A few unheralded (mostly unnamed) people manage to recognise it, to know this new kind of presence of God, and to act accordingly. These protagonists of the story are just ordinary people – and the focus is on a poor couple (Joseph and Mary) who, as a result of what God has done, are homeless (Luke) and political refugees (Matthew). Their existence, with the child, is a challenge to the Rule of Domination by a Caesar (Luke) and a Herod (Matthew).

Christmas is about a conflict between a king and a child. The king is Caesar, the issue is Empire – it is Rome. It is the Pax Romana. The child is Jesus. The issue is the Peace of Christ. A child threatens a king. Powerlessness confronts Power.

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MATTHEW’S STORY

Herod is a half-breed (Arab and Jew) who serves Rome’s interest in one of its colonies we now call Palestine. He is a despot himself, and claims the title of King of the Jews. He oppresses his people by taxes and so funds his own building projects – monuments to his own glory (like the Temple, like the Herodion). He sets up a
police state – with loyalty oaths, surveillance, informers, secret police, imprisonment, torture and execution. He retaliates brutally against serious dissenters. He cloaks his real character with a veneer of Jewish piety.

In Matthew’s Christmas story, Herod was confronted by Magi. They came from another Empire, that of the Medes. They were originally a caste of very high ranking political advisers there. They were officers of the Emperor there. They had their place in the Persian imperial court. Their political influence was legendary. They were usually opposed to various empires that threatened the local one. They became negative to Rome and its greatest-ever Empire.

In Mathew’s gospel, the Magi are both religiously conscientious and politically subversive (they well knew that Herod was aligned with Rome). They do an act of civil disobedience. The Empire (Herod) strikes back, and there is a slaughter of innocent children. The issue is Emperor versus children. Moses of old was floated down the Nile in a reed basket to escape from a paranoid potentate, and Jesus is spirited out of the country on back roads as a political refugee. It is a case of the crushing presence of power versus the liberating power of presence. Child martyrs are the political cost of incarnation.

Without this ‘real’ story, the Christmas season would be too sentimental and too innocuous in a too comfortable kind of continuing Christendom. The ‘real’ story is the counterpoint to all the pious pageantry. Our world too is teeming with refugees, murderous foreign policies and wailing mothers. But into it sneaks Jesus, and his God, like two thieves in the (silent) night…

I have been fascinated by the story of the Magi after they leave Bethlehem and go home. In Matthew, they don’t repent of any alleged sins, they don’t convert from their own inherited religion (Zoroastrianism?). They don’t try to become Jews (Christianity wasn’t around yet…). They don’t deny their past, they accept it as being home. They don’t deny their interest in reading the stars while they keep their memories of Jesus. While they were with the Holy Family, there is no record of them taking Joseph aside and questioning him about where the family came from. There is no record of them taking Mary aside and asking her where the child came from. And they didn’t think of a DNA test for the baby! (Maybe he wasn’t a baby by the time the Magi arrived – he could have been a two year old!) Rather, they were just overwhelmed with joy. In that joy an option for one kind of religion or one kind of politics rather than another just wasn’t central any more… They could go home, as most of us do, and be themselves, but the better for having had a Christmas. They had lost both their romanticism and their cynicism. They were content with what was possible…at home.

But there were three people, not Magi, who did not go home. Jesus, Mary and Joseph. They stayed there where they had been since the child was born, and when they went to Egypt they stayed there until another angel gave them directions. They were called into the mystery, and they could never go anywhere else….Wherever they were, that would always be their home.
LUKE’S STORY

In Luke’s gospel, the first visitors to the infant Jesus were not Magi - Magi are never mentioned. The first visitors to the child Jesus were shepherds. They had been minding their flocks near Bethlehem. They came as a result of a revelation – they were surrounded by the glory of God, told not to be afraid, and asked to come and see the child. They discussed it among themselves, decided to go to the city, found Mary and Joseph and Jesus, and made known what had been told to them about the child. St. Luke says that all were amazed – all except one person, Mary, the mother of the child. ‘But as for her’, she ‘treasured it all and pondered it in her heart’ – not with amazement, but with undiluted joy.

Remember that in Luke, Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem to be counted in a Roman census. I wonder if Luke deliberately put some people into the story who were not considered important enough to be counted in a census (and had no income from which to pay any taxes). Yes, shepherds! Like angels, they never appear on a roll!

Obviously, over the centuries, Matthew’s Magi have largely eclipsed Luke’s shepherds. They have been given names – Caspar, Melchior, Baltazar. There are alleged relics of the Magi! There is a claim that you can see them in Cologne cathedral. They say they have been there since 1162. But the nameless shepherds ???

Some say that Luke’s preferential option for the shepherds (he knows nothing of Magi) is part of his preferential option for the poor. The shepherds are like the excluded, the outsiders, like the tax collectors, and the women. In some Jewish writings, herdsmen are on the list of those ineligible to be witnesses in legal cases since they grazed their flocks on other people’s land (they did) and so were archetypal sinners! Luke was perhaps bringing the shepherds in from the cold…

Perhaps, but shepherds do have a positive profile in the bible. Sure, there are wicked shepherds there. They feed themselves, not the flock. They clothe themselves with wool from the sheep’s back and slaughter the fat sheep. But the Lord himself is our Shepherd!! Moses, Jacob, David were literally shepherds. Shepherd symbolism is everywhere. It was to Bethlehem that Samuel the prophet came in search of a king for Israel. David had to be summoned because he was out looking after the sheep. In Luke’s mind, shepherds were the most suitable kind of people to visit a child descended from David, who inherited the throne of David, the shepherd king, and who would in due time identify himself as the Good Shepherd.

By the way, were the shepherds all men? Pope Francis, in his interview, said ‘I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess.’

ET VERBUM IN-FANS FACTUM EST
AND THE WORD BECAME SPEECHLESS
(in Latin, in-fans means non-speaker)
CONCERTO FOR ASS, LAMB AND OX

Let us look beyond the angels, the shepherds, the child, Mary and Joseph. There are three animals at the crib. They are not the greatest in the world, they are not the most prized, but – they are there. Perhaps they are a bit like us… We might not be up to much, but we’re here anyway!

The ass is the least distinguished of the three. He has a big head, like an intellectual. He reasons. He rationalizes. He has ideas. He has ideas about everything. Especially about religion! He is descended from rationalists. He can only accept religion within the limits of what is rational and reasonable. His father always taught him that you couldn’t be Christian without being modern. The ass himself is not a great reader, but the dogmas of Reason have penetrated his being. Now he’s an economic rationalist too. This ass has lost his sense of both mystery and reason. He thinks he’s smart. He’s a real donkey.

I wonder if the donkey later on in the Palm Sunday procession, was related to this donkey. That one was always puzzled why people made such a fuss of him on that Sunday in Jerusalem.

The sheep (lamb) has no ideas of his own, but is full of other people’s ideas. Full of the ideas of the moment, of the ideas that are part of the atmosphere right now. They come from the social media. They are politically and religiously correct. The sheep says what everyone says. He is afraid of having his own convictions, afraid of being judged by others. He wants to please. He wants to do what the world does. He goes to all the right gatherings. He votes for what everyone thinks is right. He approves of ‘charity’. But the sheep is nostalgic for more assured values. He hopes his children will be more cultured and not influenced by current fads. He would like them to be informed but not violent or victims of violence. He wants them to have good shepherds. He imagines them to be Christian but not too ignorant of secular things. He wants them to be brought up by one father and one mother, if possible together. He wants them to live without medical selection, without their existence being suddenly taken from them by human decree. He has good ideas and a big heart, but he is a coward. He’s sheepish.

Was he descended from the sheep whose lambs gave their blood to mark the doorposts at the Exodus? Or was he of the line of the lost sheep – only one of whom was found?

The ox, really a bull, is no coward, but he isn’t sensitive to the opinion of others. The bull is interested only in himself. He has made a success of his life. He is a materialist. He loves comfort, loves his own set-up, his car, his clothes, his shoes. He doesn’t analyse things, he just uses them. He is content with everything, since everything smiles at him. But he thinks his wife has lost her reason – perhaps she has been in too many shops at Christmastime. But he wants – above all – social status, the taste of command, a situation that lets him come home late at night, good friends, things to dream about and the world at his feet. He has no interior life. He is so full of things he is empty of God. He is a full bull. He does not pray. To pray he would have to lack something. He has a heart that is light and free. He is his own best friend. He is a whole lot of bull.
He has made it his business not to go near temples. Bulls get sacrificed there. By priests.

There are our three animals!

At the Crib, on Christmas morning, their masks fall off, their lies are discovered, and they come out in their real character.

In their midst, is a **baby**. The baby is asleep. Just the presence of the baby changes everything. For the first time, these animals are not preoccupied with themselves, but with the baby. The little one has got through their masks and appearances. From now on, they know they have to be different.

The **ass** – quicker than the others – thinks in his big head that the baby is not a challenge to reason, but the triumph of a larger and deeper intelligence. God is then so intelligent that to be loved he has made himself into a little one. He is the Word, but one that makes you silent, and listening. This is a real conversion of his intelligence. Not such a donkey after all.

‘Who gave the wild donkey his freedom, and untied the rope from his proud neck?’ Job 39,5

The **sheep** is no longer afraid: he knows that today there is nothing stronger than this little baby. He says yes to this baby. He thinks it must be the lamb of God. For the first time in his life, he dares to say no to the mob, no to the culture of death, and yes to life and love. He knows it might cost him a lot, but… Not so sheepish.

Isaiah said that one day a lamb would lie down peacefully with a vegetarian lion.

The **bull** sees something he has never seen before. Family that depends on him. Colleagues who are more than simple executives. A God who has had the patience to wait for him, the bull, who waits for no-one! He knows now that his life is nothing if it is empty of this God. He prays, for the first time. No more bull!

‘Is the wild ox willing to serve you, and will it spend the night at your crib?’ Job 39,9

The Crib is not just the first Christian zoo. It has become a chapel. Our three animals make an act of adoration. They adore the baby in the crib.

Will you join them?

‘The stars of the morning are singing for joy, and the sons of god in chorus are chanting praise’ Job 39

[With acknowledgement to an idea of Thierry Humbrecht, O.P., Domuni, Toulouse]