

REFLECTIONS FOR CHRISTMAS ~ 25 December 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale



Our God is a God of surprises and none more startling than the surprises we find in the readings in the Liturgy of the Word for the three Masses on Christmas Day – during the night, in the early morning, and during the day (the only day in our liturgical year to have this distinction). We have become so accustomed to the Christmas stories that we just take them for granted and no longer see the wonder embedded in them. Ron Rolheiser omi reminds us, “Christmas is meant to bring us back to the crib so that our hearts can feel that freshness that wants to make us start living over again.” Let us reflect on the wonder of the readings in

today’s Liturgies of the Word.

They would have expected God to bring them out of darkness, but not to be led by a little child!

In all three Masses, the readings come from the book of Isaiah. They were written during very challenging times for the people of Israel and are among the most uplifting passages in all Scripture. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined” (Is 9:2), and “There shall be endless peace” which will be upheld “with justice and with righteousness” (Is 9:7). The wonder comes in knowing that the light and endless peace flow from the presence of a newborn child, not a mighty warrior or powerful king, ““For a child has been born for us, a son given to us” (Is 9:6).

Of course, they delight in the ones who bring the good news, but beautiful feet?

In the reading from Isaiah in the Mass during the day, we read, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news” (Is 52:7). Think about this image – we would have expected that the words of the messenger or perhaps the face of the messenger would be described as beautiful as the messenger brings the good news but not the feet! But, on reflection, it makes perfect sense! The feet are closest to Earth, in this instance, the mountain. The feet take the messenger to the people. The feet remind us that the bearer of the good news must not only speak the good news but embody the good news through intimate presence to Earth and to people. This embodiment of the good news is so important that one of God’s names from the Rabbi commentators on the Torah is *Shekinah* – the one who dwells among us. In the Christian tradition, this is the name that the angel tells Joseph is to be given to the newborn Jesus – Emmanuel, God-with-us.



The response to the good news is rejoicing but surely Earth is not joining in the singing!

What is the good news that both Isaiah and the Psalmist are celebrating? God the Lord has broken the burden that the people have been carrying, has overthrown the oppressor, has brought



Rainbow Mountain (Cusco, Peru)
Northern Lights (Canada)

endless peace with justice and righteousness, has remembered steadfast love and faithfulness for the people of Israel.

The first response to this good news is joy – joy expressed in singing, joy expressed in both people and Earth! In Psalm 96, we hear proclaimed, “O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth” (Ps 96:1). And the response is immediate, “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord who is coming” (Ps 96:11-13). Psalm 98 picks up this same joy-filled energy, “O sing to the Lord a new song. . . All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD” (Ps 98:1, 3-6).

The good news of the people of Israel finds new expression among the people of the New Testament!

There is little wonder that the later Christian communities would borrow this unexpected imagery to describe the birth of Jesus the Christ, who, in the words of the book of Hebrews, “is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3). We are immediately reminded that this same imagery was used about Woman Wisdom in the book of Wisdom, “For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of God’s goodness” (Wis 7:26) and about God who created all things with a powerful word, “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen 1:3). Just as God created with a word, so now Jesus the Christ “sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3).

Who are now the messengers of the good news, whose beautiful feet carry the message?

The unexpected images continue. The Jewish Christian writer of Matthew’s Gospel has the good news come first to the Gentile Wise Ones from the East; the Gentile writer of the Gospel of Luke has the good news come first to a group of Jewish shepherds, the lowest class in the Jewish society! In Luke’s nativity narrative, we delight in seeing the angles bring the good news to the shepherd, but we barely notice the words about the shepherds after they saw a little baby boy in a manger, “When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them” (Lk 2:17-18). The German liberation theologian, Dorothee Soelle, says of the shepherds:



The frightened shepherds become God's messengers. They organize, make haste, find others, and speak with them. Do we not all want to become shepherds and catch sight of the angel? I think so. Without the perspective of the poor, we see nothing, not even an angel. When we approach the poor, our values and goals change. The child appears in many other children. Mary also seeks sanctuary among us. Because the angels sing, the shepherds rise, leave their fears behind, and set out for Bethlehem, wherever it is situated these days.

The first Christians would have expected the Messiah to bring them out of darkness, but not that the Messiah would come as a little child, homeless and a refugee!



The story in Luke continues, “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). There is a lovely hymn with this title, “Mary was the first one to carry the gospel.” Mary carries the good news of the incarnate God in her womb and in her arms. And she carries the good news in the words which she treasures and ponders in her heart.

Pope Francis reminds us about the startling coming of God in the person of the baby Jesus:

We contemplate the child. In his littleness, God is completely present. Let us acknowledge this: “Baby Jesus, you are God, the God who becomes a child”. Let us be amazed by this scandalous truth. The One who embraces the universe needs to be held in another’s arms. The One who created the sun needs to be warmed. Tenderness incarnate needs to be cuddled. Infinite love has a miniscule

heart that beats softly. The eternal Word is an “infant”, a speechless child. The Bread of life needs to be nourished. The Creator of the world has no home. Today, all is turned upside down: God comes into the world in littleness. God’s grandeur appears in littleness.

Ron Rolheiser omi reiterates the same theme, “Christmas is meant not just to renew our faith and hope, but also to renew our innocence. God is born as helpless, vulnerable, thoroughly underwhelming baby who looks out at us quietly even as we look back at him and he judges us in that way that vulnerability judges false strength, forever, transparency judges lies, generosity judges selfishness, innocence judges over-sophistication, and a baby, gently and helplessly and disarmingly, calls forth what’s best in us.”

Christmas is a time to rejoice in the good news that God has become incarnate – once again!

In the words of Richard Rohr ofm, “The first Incarnation was the moment described in Genesis 1, when God joined in unity with the physical universe and became the light inside of everything. The Incarnation is not only ‘God becoming Jesus.’ It is a much broader event, which is why John first describes God’s presence in the general word ‘flesh’ (Jn 1:14). John is speaking of the ubiquitous Christ we continue to encounter in other human beings, a mountain, a blade of grass, or a starling.”

John's Gospel does not have an infancy narrative, but, as we hear in today's Gospel reading, it does begin with the origins of the person of Jesus, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (Jn 1:1, 3-5). Once again, the light shines in the darkness! Once again, the people and Earth rejoice!

Christmas is a time to rejoice in the good news that God has become incarnate – in each one of us – human and other-than-human!

On this Christmas day, we are reminded that, just as our creating and sustaining God makes peace through justice and right relationships, so, too, we are expected to be bearers of the good news, makers of peace, bringers of justice, living embodiment of right relationships. This is a blessing for all of us (adapted from the words of the Scottish minister Roddy Hamilton), an invitation to sing the incarnation into birth:

May we sing incarnation into birth
may the very longing of this season
be enough for your promise to take on flesh
for bread to be shared
for planet to be loved
for lost to be found
for loneliness to be befriended
for seeker to be sought
for deserts to bloom
for flavelas to become palaces
for chaos to be given rhythm
for wars to end
May we sing incarnation into birth.

The Jesuit Philip Chircop has these wise words for us as we sing incarnation into birth: "In the coming days, simmering and basking in Christmas joy, try to intentionally walk softly ... talk quietly ... kneel reverently ... rise eagerly ... Spend some time reflecting on the radical beauty of these simple words: Walk ... Talk ... Kneel ... Rise ... Softly ... Quietly ... Reverently ... Eagerly."

Happy Christmas!