

Homily - Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel NYC
Christmas 2018

Looking at the Christmas cards sent and received, not those of Santa and his reindeer, but the more religious ones of the Christ Child lying in the stable, one can easily get the impression that Jesus was born to parents of German or French or Italian ancestry. His features, His surroundings seem to have little to do with first century Israel. That is because the painters of all those famous Nativity scenes of which so many of our contemporary greeting cards are replicas, were trying to create a setting with which the people of their day could identify, wherein people could feel that the landscape, the clothing, the activities going on in the background, were all familiar to them, so that people could somehow locate themselves, find their place, in those paintings.

The challenge for us today is how do we identify with the event that we celebrate, how does the familiar Christmas story find a resonance in our lives? I would suggest that it is to some degree by looking inside ourselves--not so much in trying to imagine what the birth of the Christ Child was actually like, as by trying to see how the details of that story, we know so well, can find their parallel in what is going on, in what could be going on in our lives. For that task, the tools will not be the paints and brushes of the great masters, but the palette of our imagination, with colors taken from our everyday lives--all those experiences, good or ill, that have brought us where we are today. We will have to look into the cave of our heart to see how the birth of the Christ Child holds out the promise and possibility of a kind of "birth" inside ourselves--how our lives can be different, if we turn ourselves in the direction of that other birth, aligning our star to the star of Bethlehem, to seek in the hidden places of our lives that place where hope can come alive. Let us think back across the years to when we first heard the words of that now familiar story, and see how those same words can be given a new meaning, a new resonance--one not lodged in first century Israel, but at that place in our lives where we find ourselves at this moment.

The Christmas story is recited again and again because of the power of its words. Let us focus upon just a few of them to see what connection they can evoke with what we take for granted, but is really charged with potential for spiritual growth. For a few minutes let us ponder what the "census," the "star," the "inn" from which the couple were excluded, the "manger," the "birth" of the child, "Herod"--what they all have to do with what is going on in our lives now.

The Gospel tells us that it was the "census" decreed by Caesar Augustus that

brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. Like them, we probably have all had the experience of being reduced to a number, whether it was arguing with customer service over the telephone, or an income tax return tripping up an IRS computer sending out invitation for an audit, or figuring out the odds of being laid off from work when the company is going through hard times. In the bureaucracies that stretch back and beyond to Caesar's time, individuals don't seem to matter very much. Too often it's the power, the prestige, the influence of the people at the top, which seems to set the standard by which the world, as we're accustomed know it, is ruled. But just as the uniqueness of the Child born in Bethlehem cannot be grasped by Caesar's census-takers, so too the worth of every human being in God's sight cannot be discounted or erased by the all too frequent callousness and indifference we see all around us.

The Christmas story centers, of course, upon the "Child" who was born in Bethlehem, but it reminds us of the "child," of that new person, who can be born in us. When we think of a small infant, we think of so much potential for the future, of the possibilities that exist for that small, young life. With that child there is strength, but there is also vulnerability. With the "child" that can be born in us, there is the possibility of having a new lease on life, the possibility of engaging life more honestly. But there also arises the chance that even the best of intentions can be killed by the forces of greed, hate, cynicism and manipulation. The "Herods" of this world we'll try to slay what is aborning. Still, if we can remember the words of St. John, "Greater is He who is in you, than He who is in the world," then ultimately they can be defeated.

In our lives, too, there may appear a "star." As we look across the horizons of our lives where we've looked so many times, we may see now something we've never noticed before, something that shines with a sudden intensity and invites us to journey to a new and foreign place. There may arise the intuition, the invitation, the summons to move on, to move out of the rut we find ourselves in, to make some major readjustments or realignments in our lives. It is the awareness that things can't go on as they have been going on for too long already.

But that "star," that awareness, may lead us to the "inn" from which we, too, are refused entrance. What parallel can we find allies for that? It may be some dream, some hope, from which we have been shut out—the very thing in life we've always wanted, and now we know we can't have. It may be that life hasn't turned out as we expected that it would. We may even find ourselves saying, "I never thought I would be the kind of person who would _____, but I am, I did." So, where do we go we have been dispossessed of that place in life where we thought we'd find our niche? Do we simply stand outside in the darkness and curse fate? The Christmas story provides the answer. It says look in the "manger."

We have a "manger" in our lives, too—that place which lies off the beaten track, where we thought we'd never find ourselves. For some, the "manger" may be a therapist's office, it may be sitting down and really talking with one's spouse, with one's children or parents, it may be joining a group like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. The "manger" is that place where real growth and healing can take place. In the Christmas story the "manger" is the place where the animals are housed. It is under the warm breath of the oxen and amidst the smell of the donkey manure that the Christ Child is born. Jesus is born in the middle of all that is most grimy and gritty about life, so as to remind us that as we confront the grime and the grit in our own lives, that it is precisely the place where we have the opportunity of being "born again."

The Christmas story has to be rescued from its greeting card setting. Nor can it be so sentimentalized that it has no connection with what is going on in our lives. It is retold over and over again, so that we might here, as it were, for the first time, that we might find our place in it, and accept the grace it holds open to us, that we might become the kind of person God calls us to be.