

## Christmas Reflection

Putting Christ back into Christmas is surely the desire of most Christians. The intensity of the “*Black Fridays*” and “*Cypher Mondays*” and the rest is so intense, it is truly difficult to break through the message to “shop till you drop.” On a personal level, a great number of people try to balance the gross commercialism and the spiritual significance of the feast. A serious reading of the Scriptures makes us aware of how far we must go. The truly radical message in Luke and Matthew of the birth of Christ has a minimum connection to the superficial slogan, “Put Christ back into Christmas”.

Our “*Silent Night*” interpretation of the event leaves little room for the true message of Luke and practically no room for Matthew’s description of the story. Both evangelists are inviting us into the deepest and truest dimension of our reality, a graciousness that is always calling us out of the darkness into the light.

An important point to remember is that both Matthew and Luke describe the birth of Jesus as part of the entire gospel message. The child in the manger is the beginning of a journey that leads to the Messiah on the Cross. God speaks to us in both events that are of the one reality: God’s saving love for us. A few cultures capture this profound truth by using the wood of the *creche* for the wood of the cross for their Good Friday celebration. Matthew’s story emphasizes the connection of Jesus’ birth to the Jewish longing for the Messiah as the Son of David. This Messiah in Matthew is Emmanuel, *God with us*. The reaction to the birth, seen in the dealings of the Wise Men and Herod, prefigures all the intrigue and violence that will happen in the journey to Golgotha.

While Luke has a strong element of song and joy, the somber note in Matthew continues in the exile into Egypt and the killing of the Innocents. Mary’s infant avoids the slaughter by divine intervention only to face the Father’s will in the Garden.

Matthew’s version of the conflict of good and evil in the Holy Family and Herod looks back at Moses and the Pharaoh and looks forward to the saving death that concludes in the resurrection. The world Matthew is portraying in Jesus’ birth is a portrait of our world today with our unwelcome migrants and sexual slavery, gangs and abuse in families, grossly unjust distribution of wealth and vast investment in arms, the ever-present curse of racism and so much more.

We have created a sentimental and flowery description of the birth in Bethlehem that distorts Luke’s story. The commonly accepted version hides the uprooting, poverty and deep bewilderment of Mary and Joseph. How could God allow his Son to enter the world in such destitution?

From the moment of her call to be the Mother, Mary faced the irony of utter joy and wonder in her heart against the continual disorientation, confusion and total displacing of her plans and events in her daily life.

Both Matthew and Luke are addressing the question that pervades all the Gospels: What kind of Messiah will Jesus be?

Our cultural and commercial celebration of Christmas is filled with an answer that Jesus challenged in all his life, ministry and teachings and especially in his death and resurrection. He will not be a Messiah isolated from the poor and marginalized. He will not be draped in wealth and power. He will be a Messiah of sacrifice and service wrapped in swaddling clothes. The salvation Jesus offers as a suffering Messiah is not one of the easy fix. It is a salvation that calls for our purification and self-giving leading to a personal transformation.

Luke's message of hope and joy is more wonderous in the context of this full gospel message.

At Christmas time, just a few months before his death, Archbishop Romero captured the spiritual depth of Christmas. He said, **"Today, we recall God's reign is now in this world, and that Christ has inaugurated the fulness of time. Christ's birth attests that God is now marching with us in history – that we are not alone, and that our aspiration for peace, for justice, for a reign of divine law, for something holy is far from earth's realities. Nevertheless, we can hope for all these things, not because we human beings are able to construct that realm of holiness which God's holy words proclaim but because the builder of a reign of justice, of love and peace is already in the midst of us."**

I had these words on the Christmas, a message of hope, become very real for me recently. I was at a police station filing a report on my stolen phone. As I went to sit down to wait for the document, a young mother and her six-month-old son sat next to me. I shared how crazy it was to lose your phone. She responded, "If you want to know about crazy, you need to have a violent and abusive husband." In our conversation I learned she was an immigrant from a Moslem country only here two and a half years. Even though they both still live in the same building, the situation between her and her husband is so bad, they must exchange the child at the police station. This happens four days of the week when she goes to school. She is pursuing a Doctor's degree in clinical psychology.

What struck me about this scene was how hopeful she was despite being an abused woman, a Moslem immigrant and the mother of a young child in a failed marriage.

It was obvious to me that the message of hope and the grace of the Infant of Bethlehem is for all people and at all times even if they do not have the label Christian. The Word made flesh has exposed a reality pregnant with life and love for all people at all times even in the midst of our daily cross of the pandemic.