

Christmas, 2022

*Bethlehem* means “house of bread,” and the name refers to the fact that the village was situated in a fruitful and fertile place, where with work its soil would yield food and harvest to the faithful. Grain and fruit could be grown there and there was an abundance of fresh water in the wells. It was not a flourishing place in the sense of a great market town or trading centre, but it was a special place where favourable circumstances stimulated by effort could produce refreshment and sustenance for its people. It was not the holy city, it was not Jerusalem, the great capital, the centre of worship and ritual and influence. It was a modest village, favoured not so much in riches as in opportunity, and dear to the heart of the Jews; a village with a history, not simply with a past.

In Bethlehem was to be found the monument to Rachel, for it was here that this wife of the patriarch Jacob died and was buried; and this was the city of Ruth, who lived here with her husband Boaz, and became the great-grandmother of Bethlehem’s most distinguished son, David; and it was here that David himself was born, and thus “the city of David,” as the evangelists describe the place, is rich with associations for the Jew – a history, an association that speaks of the future as well. The prophet Micah, distressed with the worldly splendours of Jerusalem and the corruptions that surrounded him on every side, points to this modest city of Bethlehem, least among the princes of Judah, as the place out of whose past will come Israel’s future hope.

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephratha, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.* (Micah 5:2) The text is a promise that in the midst of bad things great things shall come from small things. He warns that in extraordinary

times it is in some measure to the ordinary that we must look. It is as the unknown poet said:

Small things are best;  
grief and unrest  
to rank and wealth are given;  
but little things  
on little wings  
Bear little souls to heaven.

Where you least expect to see the power of God demonstrated in a corrupt and demonic world, there you will find God working out the divine purpose by the ordinary means of flesh and blood. Though you are small, little Bethlehem, our hopes reside in you.

So, on this feast of Christmas, when our hearts are stilled by the magnitude of God's great love toward us, we are reminded that the greatness of God is seen in the wonder both of the ordinary and of the small; the miracle of God, the divine economy, is that God can make much of nothing and something out of almost anything. A little town becomes the focus of the world's last best hope; a little baby comes to oppose the forces of Caesar and fear; and human flesh and human life are dignified and made whole as never before. The test of God's power is not in the capacity to move mountains and outmanoeuvre the phenomena of nature, nor in power to perform tricks or rebuke nature; God's power is in the capacity to make much of little, for that is what God does in creation, that is what God does at Christmas, and that is what God does with us, if only we will allow it.

A long time ago I went to the Holy Land. I would like to go again and see it with adult eyes. One of the things I would very much like to go back to see is the oldest

church in the world, which stands on the site of the nativity in Bethlehem, the Church of the Holy Nativity. Its building was commissioned by Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine. It is the oldest church in the world. In its cavelike crypt beneath the high altar where the seven lamps burn eternally is found the place where it is believed Mary bore her son. It is one of the most sacred spots of our faith, and both the sacredness and the space are important, for they remind us of the tangible quality of the Incarnation. Incarnation – God taking on human flesh. God becoming a human being.

Christmas lends itself so easily to metaphor and sentiment. We need our metaphors and sentiment is the grease without which our human machinery would break down and wear out, but Christmas does not represent a sentiment, an idea, or even a feeling about God. Christmas belongs to those who recognize not the sense of the holidays but the real presence of God in their lives and in their world, not simply once upon a time long ago and far away but here and now, inhabiting our hearts and struggling with us against the tangible realities that surround us. The world of little Bethlehem was real, Caesar Augustus was real, Herod was real, taxation was real, death and slaughter were real, despair was real and normal; and in the midst of all of this God had to be made real, and was made real not in an ideal but in the flesh, for that is what the Incarnation was and is, and that is why we bow before its presence. “God with us,” for that is what *Emmanuel* means, is not just a translation of a Hebrew name but a transformation of the living, loving purpose of God to be present in and among the creation. God with us. God *for* us. God does not abandon that which God makes; God becomes one with us that we may become one with God.

So we join with God and with one another in this great feast, on this day of days, for the gift of the Incarnation continues in the fellowship we have with Christ around the Holy Table. In these most ordinary, these most tangible creatures of bread and wine, flesh and blood, we become one with the one who for us became one of us. Tonight, the house of bread is found to be this house. Every time a baby is born, the old legend says, God endorses the world; and every time we celebrate the Eucharist we experience once again Christ's incarnation. The miracle of Christmas: What is it? Is it the star, the singing angels, the wondering shepherds, the lovely mother, the exotic kings? Is it the cold night, the hopes and fears? Not really. The miracle of Christmas is that God cared enough to send the very best, and that God continues to do so in the gifts now given to us in one another.