

Message for December 20, 2020

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 2:1-20

It will never be a classic but a well-known children's book about Christmas that also appeals to many adults is Barbara Robinson's "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever". The story centres around the six Herdman children who belonged to a desperately poor family. The children were little terrors who cursed, smoked cigars, bullied their classmates and terrorized their teachers. In short they were bad news and no one liked them. One day though they decided to go to Sunday School, all because they thought that they would be given free cake if they did. Then, when the Christmas pageant was announced, they decided that they would participate and wanted all of the main parts. There was however one small problem; they knew absolutely nothing about the Christmas story. The result was an anticipated disaster; why it was going to be the worse Christmas pageant ever! And so it seemed at first.

The child playing the angel Gabriel portrayed him as a comic book hero and the three wise men were portrayed as being welfare workers who, instead of offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, offered a ham that came from a charity food basket. The girl who played Mary looked and acted like anything but the typical Virgin Mary; why she even burped the baby Jesus! The pageant was a full scale disaster in the making but the Herdman kids managed to pull it off. To be sure their interpretation of the first Christmas was unique and, some would even say eccentric, yet they succeeded simply because the Christmas story was all new to them. Since they weren't bound by tradition or expectations, they portrayed Mary, Joseph and all the rest as more regular people. It was certainly different but it truly was the best Christmas pageant ever.

As I have already mentioned, this book will never be a classic but it is both amusing and thought-provoking if only because it challenges us to

remember that the first Christmas may not have been quite as sweet or as 'perfect' as it is often portrayed. We can begin with Mary.

We think that it is so wonderful that Mary was chosen to be the mother of the messiah but did she think so? Being pregnant and unmarried in that society at that time was positively scandalous. Also, how could she ever explain her pregnancy to her parents or fiancé? "Guess what Joseph, I'm having a baby! Now I know and you know that you're not the father but that's okay, God is!" And it is a big enough responsibility to raise any child, never mind the son of God. Do we really believe that Mary thought that all of this was just wonderful? Or what about how Joseph felt when he heard the news? Yes, he came to believe but did he ever think to himself, "Perfect, just what I always wanted to be, the step-father to the Son of God!"

I'm sure that the word 'perfect' didn't come to mind either when Joseph heard about the census; that they had to make the long tiring journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. "Perfect, just what I always wanted to do; to pay a visit to the town of my ancestors with my fiancé about eight months along!" And how did Mary feel about it? Then, when they arrived in Bethlehem only to be repeatedly told, "Sorry, no room here!"? Just perfect! And what about when they found out that they could spend the night in a stable? I'm sure that once again the word 'perfect' didn't come to mind.

If we want to we can even think of the actual birth itself. We like to picture it as being so cute and sentimental with such as the lowing cattle, the baaing sheep and the cooing doves but was it really? Even allowing for the primitive conditions of the first century compared to our own, I'm fairly certain that Mary in the midst of her labour didn't tell Joseph how wonderful it all was. And once again we may be tempted to think that it was all so nice when the shepherds went to see the baby but did Mary and Joseph think so? "Look Mary, we have company!" And what must Joseph have thought when he was warned in a dream to pack up immediately and move to Egypt to escape King Herod's wrath. "Wonderful, I've always wanted to see the pyramids!"

The truth is that despite the way we sometimes like to imagine it, that first Christmas was probably anything but perfect from the participants' perspective. Mary and Joseph may well have thought that everything that could have gone wrong had gone wrong. Indeed that may also be how many of us feel as we celebrate Christmas this year pandemic style.

Our celebrations this year have been and will be anything but normal; indeed the words of a poem come to mind that reads in part:

And Christmas is a holy time,
we'll treasure through the years,
as together we remember,
the laughter and the tears.

Laughter and tears may well describe how many of us feel about Christmas this year. On the one hand there is still laughter and joy; after all it still is Christmas. It seems for example that more people than usual have put up outside decorations and there are still some of the usual activities taking place such as shopping, baking and listening to the music of the season. There is also the usual run of Christmas shows and movies on TV as well. In some ways it all seems so normal and so it is a time of laughter and yet ... As we all well know, for so many different reasons things are anything but normal this year. Indeed Christmas pandemic style may well seem to be more like a time for tears rather than laughter. In fact this year we might well feel like Mary and Joseph on that first Christmas; that far from being perfect, what can go wrong has gone wrong.

If or when we feel this way what we need to remember is that there is another perspective on that first Christmas and that is God's. Mary for example had faith and was willing to be a participant in the great drama of salvation. Joseph too came to have faith and was willing to do his part and raise God's son as if he were his own. From God's perspective it was perfect too that the Roman Emperor issued his decree that all the world should be enrolled for tax purposes, thus ensuring that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem just as it was predicted that he would be. Why even the circumstances of the birth were perfect. A stable may not have been

ideal from Mary and Joseph's perspective but it certainly was from God's because of the symbolism. Jesus, God in the flesh, joined his people at the very bottom of the social ladder; why there wasn't even a crib to lay the baby in, just a feeding trough. And who were the first to be told and to respond to the birth? It wasn't the rich or the powerful; rather it was the shepherds who, because of their occupation, couldn't keep all of the religious rituals and traditions and so were regarded as sinners by most people. Truly from a human perspective the circumstances of that first Christmas were anything but perfect or ideal but from God's perspective? It must have exceeded all expectations.

This is something that we ought to remember as we celebrate our own less than perfect Christmas this year. What we have to remember is what this special time of year is really all about. That of course is love; our love for one another to be sure but even more so, God's love for each and every one of us. That is why the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; Emmanuel, God is with us. Perhaps this message posted on the Church of Scotland's website says it best as we celebrate Christmas 2020:

Even if we can't gather in person,
Emmanuel. God with us.
Even if some Christmas traditions have had to go,
Emmanuel. God with us.
Even if we might not get to hug family and friends,
Emmanuel. God with us.
Even if we can't sing carols beside each other,
Emmanuel. God with us.
Even if Christmas Cheer is hard this year,
Emmanuel. God with us.

That is the message and promise of not only this Christmas but every Christmas. Emmanuel. God is with us.

