

## **Message for the Third Sunday in Advent – December 12, 2021**

### **Luke 1:26-38**

It was a very disturbing movie scene. In the middle of the night a group of Roman soldiers on horseback thundered into a small village. Dismounting and smashing the doors of the small homes open, they peered about in the gloom. Whenever they saw a baby boy or toddler, their swords flashed in the torchlight killing the boys. Then, as the screaming and crying grew louder and louder, the soldiers remounted their horses and thundered out of the village as quickly as they had come. This scene portrayed what is sometimes called “The Slaughter of the Innocents”, and it is the opening scene of the movie, “The Nativity”.

As its name suggests, “The Nativity” is all about the birth of Jesus and it was released to coincide with Christmas back in 2006. The movie did okay at the box office; it wasn’t a hit but it wasn’t a bomb either. I must confess that I had no particular interest in seeing it at the time since most Biblical movies do not really appeal to me; to be honest I find most of them rather unbelievable. As it happened though I read an article written by an author whom I really respect, and he wrote about how much he enjoyed the movie. Being curious, I borrowed it from the library and, a bit to my surprise, I found that over all this movie was quite alright. While it sometimes strays in some of the details, it is by and large true to the Biblical account of Jesus’ birth.

What I liked most about the movie was its attempt to at least try and be realistic. We can think of the actors for example. They weren’t pale skinned, blue-eyed blonds as they often are in Biblical movies; rather their complexions, eye and hair colour were what we would expect of people living in the Middle East. The poverty which was most certainly a fact of life back then was clearly portrayed and so too was the brutality. I think of one scene in particular when a tax collector, accompanied by soldiers, rode into Nazareth. One poor man couldn’t pay his taxes and so his young daughter, despite her parents’ howls of grief and protest, was quite literally carried off into slavery to pay the debt. Two other scenes depicted crucifixions which are not of course usual scenes in a Christmas movie, but then again crucifixions were most certainly a part of daily life at the time of Jesus. Indeed the realism carried on to the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth itself.

There was for example the portrayal of the shame and embarrassment felt by Mary's parents and Joseph when it became obvious that she was pregnant. That Mary, pregnant and unmarried, was shunned by others in the village was also made abundantly clear since to be unmarried and expecting was a social disgrace in that society at that time. There was also the long, tiring journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the frantic search for shelter, and then Mary in labour with sweat pouring down her face.

No, "The Nativity" is not our typical Christmas movie but it is to be commended for at least trying to make the Biblical account of the first Christmas 'real'. In the last little while though I have been wondering; how many of us prefer to think of the first Christmas as being nice, sweet, sentimental, and far removed from life as it really was 2000 years ago.

The writer Herbert Brokering has written a book of Advent devotions entitled "In the Bleak Midwinter". As the title suggests, the devotions are inspired by the words of the wonderful hymn of the same name. A little bit to my surprise though, I discovered that this hymn originally included a verse that is rarely included in hymnbooks today including our own. Perhaps it's not hard to see why though. It goes:

Enough for him, whom Cherubim  
worship night and day.  
A breast full of milk  
and a manger full of hay.  
Enough for him whom angels  
fall down before.  
The ox and ass and camel  
which adore.

Now why isn't this verse often included? Probably because the image of Mary nursing Jesus is just a little bit too earthy and real for many of us. Generally, we much prefer such as the oh-so-sweet but totally unrealistic hymn, "Away in a Manger".

Away in a manger,  
no crib for a bed,  
The little Lord Jesus  
laid down His sweet head.

and

The cattle are lowing,  
The Baby awakes,  
But little Lord Jesus  
no crying He makes.

Really? I must say that 'no crying' has ever been my experience with a newborn! This lack of realism also carries over into many depictions of the manger scene. While some of them have a basis in reality, many more do not. Some manger scenes in fact even reduce the birth of Jesus to farce. I have never forgotten what an American Presbyterian preacher once wrote, inspired by something he saw in a mall while doing some Christmas shopping.

"I think what really pushed me over the edge was the manger scene. There are all kinds you know – wooden, china, glass, stained glass, paper-mache. I can handle the ones where all the figures have chipmunk cheeks and little tykes' faces, a ceramic Hallmark nightmare. But when I saw the bear manger scene, I think I lost it.

No lie – bears, little painted figures of the Nativity. Mary Bear, Joseph Bear, Baby Jesus in the manger Bear, even Wise Bears from the East.

And in an obvious oversight of the laws of the animal kingdom, Shepherd Bears. I could just imagine the conversation. 'What happened to all the sheep Yogi?' 'Gee, Ben, I don't know.' Say, you got an extra toothpick?'

The Bears of Bethlehem. Just about the only thing worse would have been looking in the manger to find Bart Simpson.

Father, forgive us I thought. We simply do not know what we are doing."

Or do we? If we reduce the birth of Jesus to farce or turn it into nothing more than a nice, cute, heart-warming story that is far removed from the real world of Palestine in the first century A.D., a world where infants could be slaughtered on a king's whim and children sold into slavery for the non-payment of taxes, then its message and promise can become unreal too. To put it simply, if we trivialize the Christmas story then we trivialize both its message and its promise. And what is the message and promise of Christmas?

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."  
Think about it. Such is the love of God for each and every one of us that he, the

one who created a world and a universe so vast and wonderful that it boggles our imaginations, became one of us to know and experience life as we do, both the good and the bad. God, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, willingly chose to become a human to experience life first-hand as we know it so that one day, some day, we might know and experience life as he knows it. Emmanuel: God is with us, now and forevermore, no matter what.

This is the great news and promise of Christmas, that God loves us, forgives us, redeems us, and is with us. But for those for whom this is not, for whatever reason, good news, then the great temptation is to either ignore it or belittle it. And what better way is there to trivialize the message than by trivializing the event behind it. Perhaps that preacher who was so angered by the bear manger scene had it wrong. Maybe it isn't, "forgive us for we know not what we do". Perhaps it should be "forgive us even as we know what we are doing". That event we call "The Christmas Story" is far more than just a nice, sweet, sentimental story and we should never forget it.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Gracious God, hear us as we now offer to you this prayer of thanksgiving and intercession.

Christmas is now less than two weeks away and this season is one that is characterized by joy for so many of us. We thank you for the many different ways in which joy comes into our lives, even as we continue to wrestle with the pandemic.

We thank you for the joy of song and laughter; the good memories of Christmases past, and the hope of good ones to come.

We thank you for the joy that comes into our lives through our loved ones and friends.

We thank you for the joy that comes into our lives through our caring for and sharing with others.

Above all, we thank you for the joy that comes to us through you and what it is that we celebrate at this special time of year, the birth of your Son.

That special birth in Bethlehem means so many things to us; that you love us, forgive us, redeem us and are sharing the journey with us. There is also the joy that is to be found in our salvation and the promise of the life yet-to-come. Help us we pray to rejoice in the good news of Christmas and to not lose sight of what it is truly all about.

We pray this day for all who feel so little joy at this time of year.

We pray for those who are facing their first Christmas without a loved one; may they find peace and comfort in the good memories of the past, and in the knowledge that you are sharing their heartache.

In this season so often characterized by excess, we pray for those who feel so little joy because, materially at least, they have so little.

We pray for all who feel so little joy because they feel overwhelmed by worry and fear, as the pandemic seems to go on and on.

We remember and pray this day for all who feel so little joy because they have, for whatever reason, lost sight of what this season is truly all about, the birth of your Son.

Grant we pray that hope, joy, peace and love will fill the lives of all of your children everywhere and not just during these days leading up to Christmas. We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen