

Christmas Day, 2014

St. Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is a wonderful & heart-warming story. It is filled with deep human sentiment and engaging romantic images: Mother & child, shepherds & angels, stables & mangers.

The stuff from which Christmas carols, Christmas cards, Christmas crèches are made.

While it is true that Luke's version can bring to mind something along the Hallmark cards way of thinking, but this story can also inspire real devotion just as it certainly has inspired magnificent works of art—priceless treasures of the great masters who delighted in painting scenes of the Nativity.

There is a real place in the scheme of things for us to receive the Holy Child with deep sentiment; a sentiment with which we would receive any child and which we would hope that every child would be received.

But there is a big problem if sentiment and romance alone define our experience of Christmas. For as sentiment and romance can lead us to deep devotion and even adoration, sentiment and romance can also easily disintegrate into the shallow and the meaningless.

As we know, there are a whole lot of folks who celebrate Christmas, void of any faith content.

A friend from N.Y. told me that the radio announced that in Woodstock Christians, Jews, Buddhists and Moslems take to the streets on Christmas eve in revelry and festivities that anticipate the arrival of Santa Claus.

The announcement went on to say that this is what Christmas is all about: people getting together in a spirit that transcends their differences.

Others settle for meaning in terms of family get-togethers, and feasts of food.

There is something of the deepest significance wrapped in Luke's telling of the story of the holy birth. But because of our inclination to settle for hollow sentiment, empty romance, and trivializing cliches- it behooves us to regularly approach the story with fresh eyes less in focusing on the heartwarming, we fail to, or stop short of, connecting seriously with the deep truth that Luke's poetic narrative is intending to convey and bring home to us...

There is another story of the holy birth in our scriptures that lends itself less to sentiment and more to the heart of the matter.

A version that avoids us having to wade through angels and shepherds and oxen and donkeys.

The second story of the holy birth comes to us from today's gospel of John;

so let's use this version as a window onto the deepest meaning of Luke's Christmas drama.

John's account of the holy birth does not begin in Nazareth with an angel's announcement to a virgin named Mary, betrothed to a man named Joseph.

Rather, it begins in eternity.

It begins before time.

It begins in a mystery without a beginning or end.

It begins in the mystery when we dare to name the Son of the Father, Jesus.

And so Jesus tells us: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

In God's eternity, before time, before the "big bang" that fueled the birth of the universe, there was the Word who was with God and who was God.

Our scriptures begin with the story of God's choice to go out of himself, to relate beyond himself, to transcend himself.

God spoke, the scriptures tell us, and there was a starry explosion of creative love.

Think about it: if we split an atom, is there not an explosion?

By analogy, if the eternal God speaks, if God, as it were splits himself open, should we expect anything less than a "big bang?"

John continues: All things were made through the Word and without the Word nothing that was made, was made.

The word spoken becomes the creative power through which all that is—is called into existence.

It is not unusual for people to be awed by the grandeur of the universe, whether they understand it as an accident of molecular chemistry or as a purposeful expression of Divine love.

But for people of faith, the "big bang" in all its magnificent splendor, as it ripples across the ages of time, is but the prelude to an even Bigger Bang.

Returning to John's gospel: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The creative Word spoken in the beginning became the incarnate Word, the enfleshed Word, who even as he pitched his tent among us continued to live in the bosom of the Father,

continued to live in this Mystery of all mysteries.

God made a choice to contain Himself even within our flesh.

He makes a choice to render Himself not only vulnerable but absolutely vulnerable as a newborn, a baby who shivers in the night and wishes to be fed by his Mother when he's hungry.

Returning for a final time to John's gospel: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...yet the world which was made through him knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not."

The Son of God not only took our flesh, but took our flesh when and where it is most weak and most powerless, as a newly born infant.

The Word became flesh and became an outcast—he became one with all of us and became most intimately one with all who have been, are, or will be cast out:

With those cast out of their mother's womb  
With those cast out of their parent's love  
With those cast out by the infidelity of their spouses  
With those cast out by the lack of their children's love and concern  
With those cast out because of a disability or illness they suffer  
With those cast out because of who they are  
With those cast out because of whom they love  
With those cast out for what they believe  
With those cast out by tyranny  
With those cast out by violence  
With those cast out by hatred  
With those cast out because they are not well heeled, well born, well bred, or well educated.

And so Christmas is the Feast of All outcasts, those whom the gospel refers to as the poor, those marginalized in a world that values power, and money and status.

This world is represented by the shepherds, who are the first to hear the good news of redemptive love, it is this world who are the first to receive and be received by the Word who became flesh and who became as one cast out, and the first to receive power to become children of God.

Christmas is a feast of hope for all who sit in darkness, for a light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never be able to overpower it...

It is this understanding of the birth of Jesus that allows us all the opportunity to have: a merry Christmas...