

The Nativity of the Lord

December 25, 2023

Readings

Is 9:1-6

Ps 96: 1-2, 2-3, 11-12, 13

Ti 2:11-14

Lk 2:1-14

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And so the order went out for all who lived beneath the *Pax Romana* to register, each in his own town. Caesar wished to count his subjects and collect their taxes. Caesar wished to remind every quiet farm and bustling marketplace that his words shaped the world and set fire to the feet of nations.

Joseph the carpenter, an obscure descendant of the house and family of David, was obliged to journey to Bethlehem. Silent as always, he does not tell us what he is thinking. Does he hope this will be a reunion, a renewal of the bonds of familial affection? Unlikely, as the descendants of David are many, and Joseph undoubtedly has thousands of cousins he has never met. Or is he hoping for a homecoming? Probably not – Joseph is too practical to expect the town elders to string welcome banners above the streets and provide teams of Bethlehem boosters ready to welcome the waves of visitors competing for limited housing.

No, Joseph knows the score. Someone in far-off Rome had the bright idea for a world-wide census. Underworked bureaucrats with servants and secretaries sought favor with the emperor and manufactured yet another decree whose consequences they will be shielded from, while millions are forced to walk crowded roads and sleep four-to-a-bed and pay twice the normal rate for meals.

As a result, Christ is born in a barn: “there was no room for them in the inn.” These words comes to us as a simple statement of fact, but they are also prophetic words, and the crowded inn is a mighty symbol. How many of us here, like the inn of Bethlehem, have no room in our lives and in our hearts for the Lord of Life Himself? How many of us are keepers of an inn cluttered with ancient grudges and new hatreds? How man of us lead lives firmly settled on gluttony, lust, and sloth, and will abide no inconvenience to offer hospitality to the Christ?

Nowhere does the story say that the innkeeper is a grasping man. He is not a ready-made villain, a wicked one-percenter determined to offer housing only to the well-to-do and respectable. This is not a case of malice, only bad timing. If the innkeeper takes this couple into his crowded inn, he must rearrange his guests, already paid up and comfortably settled. Where is the fairness in that?

But that’s what happens when we allow Christ into our lives. We have to rearrange our homes – push furniture together, set up the children’s table, and find clean sheets for the couch. Hospitality is demanding – all the more when it is long term.

As we celebrate this feast today, what are we going to do about Christ? What will we rearrange and give away to make of our lives a spacious inn? What clutter can we clear so that when the grace of God appears we are ready to give Him rest? What can we forgive, to whom can we be reconciled, what wounds can we tend, how much pride can we smash, what locks can we spring, how many sick can we visit, what are the tender mercies we can pour out upon the poor, the grieving, and the heartbroken?