

25 December 2017 (Christmas Day, Year B)

No room for them at the inn!

Once again we gather to celebrate Christmas. The different gospels that are given to us today present us with two different pictures. The prologue of the gospel according to John, which we read in the Mass during the day, reminds us that the child Jesus that we see in the manger is actually the Word of God made human, God himself.

During the midnight Mass celebration we read from the gospel according to Luke who takes us into the small stable where Mary laid her newborn child in the manger, since there was no room for them at the inn. As we celebrate this Christmas, we need to sit between these two gospels, in one hand holding the truth that Jesus is God-with-us and in the other the utter poverty and humility that surrounded Jesus at his birth.

In our nativity scenes we place the small newborn child in his manger, surrounded by Mary and Joseph, the cow and the donkey, the shepherds and the kings. It all seems too cute, so quiet, so nice; but I wonder if Mary and Joseph would have concurred!

When Mary and Joseph arrived at the inn, they were told that the place was full and the inn could not provide the necessary privacy for Mary to give birth to her child. Instead they were taken to the stable at the back of the inn, where animals were usually kept. This was not the most sterilised hospital ward; it most probably stank of animals. In this poverty and humility our God took on the shape of a human being.

The poverty, humility and messiness of a poor stable, with a feeding trough for a crib, is a very appropriate place for us to start. Many times we make grand plans for our families and ourselves; we dream of mansions and wealth. Our well thought out plans rarely come to fruition, instead we find ourselves in the poverty of a stable, a far cry from the mansion we had imagined!

It strikes me that this image of the poor, smelly and uncomfortable stable in Bethlehem is a very good image for our Church in Australia today. We dream of being part of a large well respected Church, with large crowds attending its various celebrations and activities, and yet we find ourselves in a small, smelly stable. If we are not careful we can easily forget the other side of the story given to us by the gospel according to John; Jesus is also God! The question is: how did we get here?

If you were Mary or Joseph, would you have calmly accepted to give birth to your first-born child in a stable? Did Mary and Joseph accept this calmly or did they protest at the fact that there was no room in the inn? Were they angry at God who did not provide a comfortable place for Mary to give birth in? What kind of God do we worship who does not even look after his own son?

I am sure that in the last few weeks, months and years you often asked yourself why you are still part of this Church. Many of us were challenged by friends and neighbours about our belief in God who seems to be absent and does not seem to be too interested in the sinfulness and mistakes of our Church. In moments like these we need to come back to this small, smelly and uncomfortable stable in Bethlehem. If this stable was good enough to hold the God and creator of the whole universe, why should I find it difficult to sit quietly in this place? Even in this great poverty and humility the baby child in the manger is still the Son of God. Even when I feel battered and bruised and when things no longer make sense for me, I need to remind myself that I am still the child of God.

Fr Mario