

## **The First Welcome**

The first thing John says of Jesus is that he was light and life. From the beginning of time God has offered light and life and from his very birth Jesus offered the same to every one he encountered. We have heard the Christmas story more than once now this Christmas season. We have listened to a story we've heard many times before. Because we are so familiar with it, its truth may not engage us anymore. We know, that young Mary gives birth to a baby in a Stable and the child is placed in a feeding trough. We don't know whether Joseph was able to find a midwife to assist in the birth. We do know that they took shelter in the stable because there was "no vacancy" anywhere else in Be signs on the doors of all the inns, the motels of that day.

We know that Bethlehem was full of visitors because the Emperor Augustus had decreed a census and because people were counted in their town of birth Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem. This is a story of oppression. Of tyrants forcing people to make impossible journeys and Kings wanting to kill this child.

The story has a familiar ring to it even today. We may dress it up with tinsel, Christmas trees, poinsettias, shining stars and angels but it is a story of oppression and vulnerability, of injustice with little mercy. The hope is that as we tell it we notice the mercy, the love, the generosity the wonder of God with us.

What I noticed particularly this year was the welcome of strangers and outcasts. God chose from the very birth of Jesus to welcome the unwelcomable. Shepherds were the first to journey to bethlehem. Shepherds from the fields. Dirty, stinky, unimportant, unwashed herders of livestock existing at the margins, far from the power-centers of respectability and prestige were the first of the faithful to see Emmanuel. It's the Christian story of God meeting the most vulnerable and outcast first.

It's a message of hope for the weak and the weary, that even God recognizes them. The least significant become famous for all of human history.

And yet in Matthew's Gospel, it is not shepherds who come looking to the Child. It is wise men (or kings as legend has it), people of considerable resources and learning, international travelers who know the stars. Interestingly enough however

they still come from outside--from other nations, other religions, other cultures. No matter where they came from they were welcomed. The point of the Christmas story is not the religious beliefs or cultures of the people but rather that they came to meet God. Everyone does not have to have the same belief and practice and yet the core of our faith tells us that we all can look to this Child for light and peace and welcome. And if we all chose to live as this child our world would be abundant in hope, peace, joy and love forever more.

The wise men bring gifts: gold, a costly stone that speaks of the preciousness of the Child; frankincense, a blessed aromatic that signifies the sacredness of the Child; myrrh, a curative ointment that points to the healing gifts of the Child. Preciousness, sacredness, healing--this is what the magi are looking for. This is what they come to adore. And it is this practice that we are invited to be part of today on this Christmas day and every day beyond.

We may come and worship the Child who was born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, the Child who shows us what is at the heart of every child, every man, every woman. But it is not to an ancient story that we bow. For the Child is in our midst right now, in every bright and dark place of the world we find emmanuel.

The Christ Child is as close to us as our very souls. We often hide God away under doubts, fears and denials in our lives, but deep within us the light of Christ is always waiting to be born anew. Waiting for us to live into the story of life and light and holy welcome for all the world. The question is not where will we find God. For God is everywhere. The question is whether we will visit the manger and accept the welcome to participate in the bringing about of God's loving kingdom here on earth.

may we so live.

Amen.