

"THE OUTSIDE AND THE INN"

TEXT: "...and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2: 7 b)

INTRODUCTION To be sure, it wasn't the Bethlehem Hilton - but whatever its name and its size and its rating, the inn in Bethlehem that failed to give accommodations to Mary and Joseph that night two thousand years ago is familiar to more people than the most widely advertised hotel in the world.

I've often thought that should the site of that inn ever be identified with any degree of certainty by archeologists, preachers around the world should be solicited for its restoration because of all the sermons to which it has given birth. I've used it as a spring-board for more than one Christmas sermon, and I find myself turning to it again today - but with a different twist and emphasis.

DEVELOPMENT The usual characterization, of course, makes the innkeeper something of a villain in the setting, and the registered guests who were inside enjoying themselves as unwitting accomplices to this refusal to grant hospitality to Mary and Joseph and the child to be born that night.

But let me take the innkeeper's part for a moment. Because of Mary's condition, it is likely that she and Joseph knocked on the door rather late in the day. What was the innkeeper to do - evict a paid up guest to accommodate these two strangers who had arrived in town? Perhaps in the darkness of the early night he could not discern that Mary was with child. Or it may be that he never saw or spoke to either of them. It's altogether likely that some employee out front or behind the desk in the lobby, or perhaps a posted sign, could have made it clear that no room was available in the inn.

As for the guests gathered inside, it was probably the case that not one of them knew what was going on. Guests as a rule do not determine hotel policy or participate in the admission decisions at the front desk. To make that anonymous businessman the prototype of some form of Christ-rejection is somewhat unjust.

GOD AND HIS WAYS "She gave birth to her first-born son, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn".

I think we're on firmer ground when we approach the subject by asking ourselves what Jesus' being born in a stable tells us about God and his ways of dealing with men. I should like to think that if ever providence operated anywhere it was at work in the arrangements that surrounded the birth of Jesus. The details of time and of place and of manner were not left to choice. God moves in a mysterious way - his wonders to perform. Why then the stable and not the inn?

Perhaps it was because God has a way of coming into history from the outside - from outside our theological systems, our social and religious institutions, our in-grown patterns and ways of doing things. Let the inn, therefore, represent the establishment and let us learn from that first Christmas that God can and more likely than not will come to us without the benefit of establishment support and assistance. Paul understood this for he noted in writing to the early Christians at Corinth:

"To shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame what is strong, God has chosen what the world counts weakness. He has chosen things low and contemptible,

mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order."

And this - not because God is capricious and unsteady - but because man from the beginning has sought to capture, to control, to exploit the holy, to identify God with his own interests, to make God party to his purpose, to blunt God's searching truth by intimacy and familiarity. In short - man has so often tried to take God over....but God won't be taken over. Those lines of Tennyson come to mind:

"Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they"

And God never leaves Himself without a witness. And when you stop to think about it, you realize that from the very beginning those witnesses have a way of coming not from the inn, but from the outside.

One of the first lessons in morality recorded anywhere in the Bible came, interestingly enough, from an outsider. Abraham had passed his wife Sarah off in Egypt as his sister. He was reprimanded in these words by Pharaoh: "What is this that you have done to me? Why did you say, 'She is my sister' so that I took her for my wife?" This was a voice from outside the faith correcting the father of the faithful.

It was the outside voice of Elijah that nettled Ahab and Jezebel so well established in their royalty. It was the people of Nineveh who responded to Jonah's appeal for repentance. And one could go on through the Old Testament..

And in the New Testament the pattern continues. The forerunner of Jesus, as we saw two weeks ago in the sermon, was not a conventional Pharisee or Sadducee, but a voice crying in the wilderness "Prepare ye the way". It was a Roman centurion who prompted Jesus to say, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith". They were Greeks who came to Andrew during Holy Week and said, "Sir, we would see Jesus". It was a Samaritan rather than a priest or Levite who saved that poor, helpless victim that day on the Jerusalem to Jericho Road. And in the early church, it was an outsider, Saul of Tarsus, who caught the vision of divine love and helped to set the Christian cause in motion outside the borders of Israel.

And at so many times and places across the centuries of church history, the voice of God has come from the outside the institution, from beyond the establishment, bringing with it a freshness and a voice of courage calling for reform.

We keep looking to the inn for our salvation, but the Saviour waits outside.

I read recently that large corporations often go to the outside for their chief executives lest by promoting from within they become perilously inbred. Apparently the institutions that really want their efficiency and effectiveness evaluated call in an outside firm.

A CONCERN ABOUT CHRISTMAS

Perhaps by now some of you may be able to detect something of an uneasiness in my mind about our Christmases. It would almost appear that we are holding Jesus in captivity, that we are holding him by virtue of our hospitality toward Him. We assume, most

of us, that Christ is neatly nestled there in the inn with us, and this can be a dangerous assumption - if not a fatal one. At times I'm not so sure he is.

I think you know what I mean. Our celebrations of Christmas are usually aesthetically pleasing and neatly programmed and enthusiastically engineered. Our parties and celebrations are always fun - but let's face it - they do have a way of avoiding the issues or postponing the questions that the Christ Child came to raise. Our various rites and our services are designed to minimize the difference between God's holy will and our imperfect way. We so easily forget that this Christ Child over whom we make such a fuss eventually grew up, made some demands on people, and was eventually put to death in one of the cruelest forms ever devised by men for taking human life because he was calling on people to him seriously....reminding them that the rule of God involved the rule of love.

I suppose it is alright to quote from The Catcher in the Rye. Remember that passage where Holden takes his girlfriend to see the colorful Christmas show or extravaganza at Radio City Music Hall. The lights are there.....the sound of well-tuned instruments....the hidden wires....the motion.....the activity....the songs....the dramatic curtain effects....and the first rate professional staging. But Holden sees through it all when he says:

"Old Jesus probably would've puked if He could see it...all those fancy costumes and all. The thing Jesus really would've liked would be the guy that plays the kettle drum in the orchestra".

HOMELESSNESS OF JESUS

Perhaps it is that the homelessness of Jesus is the source of His power over men, their appeal to their hearts. The homelessness of Jesus - think about it. The scriptures say, "He hath no place to lay his head". Not in your ideology or mine. Not in your theology or mine. Not in your country or mine. "He hath no place to lay his head". He is not in the inn of black theology or the inn of white supremacy. He is not in the inn of laissez-faire capitalism or the socialist state. He is not in the inn of the American dream or Soviet Russia's latest ten year plan. To all of these, He is outside. And this is our salvation and our hope.

For God did not come in Jesus Christ to ratify our judgments, to confirm our values, to help us fulfill our wishes. Rather - He came as one outside to bring the light and the love of God to bear on the earthly strivings of all men.

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"She gave birth to her first-born son and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn". That's where He is, whether we like it or not, outside. And that's where we must look to find signs of his movement in the world.

Andrew Blackwood, Jr. - a distinguished preacher and son of a distinguished clergyman - has given us a poem about Christmas with which I should like to complete this sermon. For it states better than I can the burden of that which is in my mind and on my heart as we again prepare for the birthday of the Saviour of mankind:

"Jesus - what have you done to us?
We wanted a pet kitten,
And you turned into a tiger.
We liked the way you were,
Why couldn't you leave us alone?"

We wanted you to show up when we wanted
you to make us feel good.
We wanted a pretty church for weddings and
baptisms and funerals.
We wanted the cute Easter bunny hopping
around the lawn.
We thought religion is good for the kiddies.

Now all of a sudden you've turned against us.
We wanted peace and you brought us a word.
Things were going along all right
then you got interested in the poor people,
now they're strutting around like they are
going to inherit the earth.

Now all of a sudden you tell us to love our
enemies -
Do you know what will happen if we do?
They will nail our hide to the wall
And what will we do then -
Keep on praying for them?

We liked you when you were a little boy -
gentle, meek and mild,
Cooing in your cradle.
All those nice shepherds and angels
And we felt just awful about King Herod.

Look at all we did for you.
We made a national holiday in your honor.
We built big industries around it.
Christmas cards, toy machine-guns,
for the kiddies - all those fancy gift-wrapped
whiskey bottles.

We built pretty churches in your honor -
stained glass, organs, the works,
And when the people moved away from the
riffraff
The church followed them
straight out into the suburbs.

O look at all we've done for you, Jesus -
Why can't you leave us alone?
We've got enough troubles now,
Why do you keep poking us in the conscience?
What do you want - our hearts?

PRAYER It is our hearts, O Lord, that thou wouldst have, and in our better moments we know this. O Thou who art busy with every man - enable us by thy spirit, to face up to more in Christmas than we have ever understood before. Help us to want what thou hast promised; to hear what thou hast said; and to receive thy gift on thy terms - all of this to our salvation and thy glory. In the name and spirit of the Christ Child. Amen