

Whenever dramatic events are relived after the movement of time, we usually find a villain and a hero in the cast of the reenactment. In fact, the recaling of any ancient drama seems to lose something unless we can identify the forces of evil and the forces of good.

As you know, this season is a sort of season of all seasons for those who call themselves Christian. The pageant of the first Christmas is replayed each year with visions of a day long ago when the drab little village of Bethlehem was colored by beams of bright hope brought by the Christ Child. The town was tense with angry people who were forced to sign the tax rolls. Although we talk a lot about the impact of Christmas, to be quite frank, the birth of this baby didn't at first change the world too much. There seemed to be only a few people who were aware of the inner drama, and they weren't too clear about its meaning. I imagine, that though we look back with awe, that the birth was rather inconsequential for Bethlehem that night.

But our yearly recollection of the Christmas drama brings to our thoughts villains and good guys. Herod is perhaps the prime villain, but there was another villain..the man who said NO, then YES - the inn keeper. The gospel writers were not critical of him, in fact they treat him as incidental to the story.

Let us look at him with some kindness but not absolve him ² from close scrutiny. For viewed objectively, the innkeeper becomes

1. a symbol of the frailty of humankind, a representative of all those who compromise with doing the right things.

He said: "There is no room in the inn" Then he said: "There is room in the stable". If he was a prototype of modern innkeepers, we would know that the "no vacancy" sign is a cover. Modern innkeepers usually have a handful of rooms for great emergencies or for special customers.. But, of course, the little town was overflowing with people..and Joseph and Mary had to travel slowly, so they arrived late.

To his credit the innkeeper said YES after saying NO. But if he had acted more positively he could have done better.

For example he could have noted Mary's condition to some of the male room occupants. Surely he would have found one with the necessary compassion to give up his room. Or the innkeeper could have given her his own room.

By instead, he did what many have done thru the centuries. He did just enough to salve his conscience. Any person might do the right thing, up to a point. Or we will do what is right if we are forced to. Or well do the right if it doesn't cost us anything or involve us personally. Let us recognize the poignant truth that we often behave like the innkeeper.

2. The innkeeper is also representative of those who base their decisions about human interaction in regard to class rather than human need. Now, of course, the world has not changed in this respect. Joseph and Mary were very poor, and this probably was an inexpensive hotel. If a man of rank had taken his pregnant wife to a high class establishment, strong effort would have been made to reorder things. If a man of wealth had come to the same inn, the innkeeper would have been so flattered, he would have made every effort to work out something..besides the stable. In fact he would have taken a lot of pride in the fact that it was likely that a prince would be born in his establishment.

But it wasn't that way when Mary and Joseph came. The innkeeper was not a bad man, yet he was not truly good in the way God expects his children to be. Quite in contrast to the innkeepers class attitude toward his parents, Jesus had no regard during his life time of class and caste....he first responded to human need. He gave the same attention to the woman of the streets as he did the important Nicodemus. In fact, it was this one aspect of Jesus' way of doing things which caused a much trouble as any other.

Again, let us recognize that we are often in the innkeepers shoes in our approach to others...and their social level.

3. Now, the innkeeper also represents those who unknowingly, perhaps, refuse Jesus because they are pre-occupied with

the things of this life. I say unknowingly because it would not be fair to say that this man refused to allow the son of God into his establishment. And that is just the point. Had he known the circumstances, we would have reacted differently. In one of the parables Jesus tells of a rich man who died and went to Hell. From there the rich man cried out that if someone would tell his brother's of life's true design, they would not make the mistake he made.

That may be true, but that is not the way life works. If God were to audibly call us by name and tell us his will at every point of decision, life would be easily conquered. But then it would have no real option, we would be overly influenced by the divine. Somehow, in the mystery of it all we are left to live by the thin thread of faith and commitment to the Lord. We have eyes to see with, we have ears to hear with. If thru it all we are enamored and pre-occupied with vain things, we become blinded to these things and deafened to God's voice.

And the truth of this story, and the truth of our faith, is that Jesus is always looking for a hom. He is looking to be born alive in each event of our lives. Happy is the vocation where Jesus is born into the calling. Happy is the person where Jesus is born into his or her choices. This story says: "Don't be so pre-occupied with your own ways that Jesus can't be born into the situation".

The innkeeper said NO, then YES, but it was not the best

YES

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Let me tell you about one man who let Jesus into his life one Christmas several years ago. It is told by an Arkansas United Methodist minister.

He said that he was conducting a revival meeting in a certain church, and he and the pastor were guests a a young couple and their three little children for a meal. On the way ^{to the} home the minister told the visiting preacher that the home would be bare except for the basic essentials. The heart-rending story was that on the eve of the previous Christmas, the couple with their children had gone to town to take the children's and other assorted presents off of lay-a-way. The children were so excited that they went in their sleeping clothes.

With great joy the family returned home, only to face the horror of a pile of ashes. . their home had burned. Ironically the young father had just become a Christian about three weeks before.

So the evangelist asked the pastor anout the man's attitude ...was he bitter. He was told that he carefully and tenderly gathered his family about him, and set about re-establishing their lives with his small laborer's wages and inadequate insurance.

The eavnpelist continues...when we walked thru the bare

front room to the kitchen where we ate, the young wife began
to tell them the story.. The hardest thing for her to bear,
she said, was the loss of a year old refrigerator on which
the last payment had just been made.. And the evangelist
says that he kept silently wondering: "Oh, God, why did this
happen to this fine young family?" As he was musing, the
young father broke in and said: "Mr. Johnson, before I be-
came a Christian lots of things . . even my family . . didn't
mean that much to me. But now that I've become a Christian
they are important to me and even tho we don't have much of
a house, we have a home. You may not believe it, but that
was the happiest Christmas of our lives.

Remember the lines from the carol?

Oh, come to my heart, Lord Jesus,

There is room in my heart for thee.