

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2016

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Saint Luke's description of the Birth of Christ is so very familiar to us. We do not think of it this way but it is told with incomparable skill. Everything Luke says about earth is commonplace and ordinary. The birth of a child in circumstances of poverty or in refugee camps happens thousands of times each day. The religious excitement of a few uneducated shepherds has its own modern equivalent in people of whose zeal you and I may not necessarily approve. And yet these incidents are superbly and deftly crafted in with the multitude of the heavenly host with their exultant tidings of great joy. The angels "spill the beans" on Almighty God's otherwise quiet entry into human life. Angels, shepherds, a stable, animals bellowing, a cold night, a mother who is a virgin, a baby lying in a cattle feeding trough, a non-biological father. In fourteen verses we have a wonderful mix up of nature and super nature. Truth is always stranger than fiction.

One of the contrasts, however, gives pause for reflection. In medieval mystery plays of the Nativity much was made about a brutal innkeeper, packing in the paying customers with an eye not on hospitality but on the bottom line. That too has a modern equivalent as we read about desperate people fleeing carnage in their native lands only to be drowned in unsafe or over crowded boats at sea. Perhaps it is better to leave St Luke's short sentence unembellished by pious imagination. Luke states the case simply. "There was no room in the inn." And his stark and sober statement leaves it to us readers to ask: "what about us? Where do we fit in this story?"

There are probably not many people today who, with varying degrees of knowledge and serious thought, have rejected Christ completely. Truth to tell, there weren't very many of those people in any age. More people are just lazy or too busy being selfish and self-centered. Some things never change. For most of us, at least *some* of the time, Christ is merely crowded out. The Christmas gospel tells us this has been the Lord's experience right from His birth.

For a moment let's leave the presence of the Holy Family in the stable and look into the inn. It is well lit and warm, crowded with people of worldly accomplishment. They are likely trying to outdo one another in conviviality over a bowl of wine. That also has its modern equivalent. But where do we find God

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Incarnate? “There was no room in the inn.” So declared St Luke, leaving it to us to moralize on that state of affairs. Christ’s place was on the outskirts, in the dark discomfort of the stable.

The old medieval mystery plays told us about a villainous innkeeper, his tenderhearted wife and compassionate staff. That dramatic contrast was later understood and appreciated by Charles Dickens. The center of so many lives is organized apart from God and His truth and love. Christ has not been recognized, or else ignored, or sent to the periphery. He is simply overlooked. And this too was not just a problem in first-century Bethlehem. To some degree it is a description of us all. Christ in the stable is not entirely out of our lives. If He were, we wouldn’t be assisting at Mass this evening! But if Jesus were in the center room in the “inn” where we live, as the most honored guest, then we would become uncomfortable either with His holiness, or with the world around us. Jesus does not fit in with our other guests of long-standing relationship. His words of purity, humility, honesty, sacrifice, and obedience, would make for strained conversation at best. And nothing in *Emily Post* or *Martha Stewart* would get you out of that one! All of us, at least part of the time, are happy to have Christ Jesus somewhere about, but preferably on the fringe. That is what began at Bethlehem.

The Christmas scene described by Saint Luke is a masterpiece of contrasts and balances. But your enjoyment of the Christmas Gospel Good News must not stop with admiration for Luke’s literary craft! And please do honor the day of the Saviour’s Birth with the exchange of gifts and good conversation and food. For Christ is born among us, and it is cause to celebrate.

But also ask yourself to what extent you are engaged in ordering your life to make room for the Christ Child. When you do that, avoid making your assessment against the backdrop of those who do less than you do. Your measuring stick is the example and claims of the Child in the straw. Make it not solely in terms of the discharge of the external obligations of our holy religion, but by your doing of the ways of His laws and the work of His commandments, through each small victory over self and sin.

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In the wonderful mix up of natural and supernatural that combined in the Birth of Christ, angels associated with shepherds. This was not to give the shepherds something to talk about! It was so that one day, through Christ, shepherds *and everybody else* may associate with angels. God became human so that men might become divine. That is the very hope and goal of our Catholic faith: that your soul and mine become “inns” for the receiving, hospitality, and, yes, entertainment, of our Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ. *Amen.*