

No Place for Jesus

In the name of the Savior born to you this day, dear friends in Christ: We heard in this morning's well-known Gospel lesson how the Virgin Mary, the mother of our Lord, wrapped the infant Jesus in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, "because there was no place for them in the inn." No place in all of Bethlehem for baby Jesus except for a ramshackle shed standing in a pen for livestock – a place which probably wasn't anywhere near as clean or picturesque as the ones in the nativity scenes you see on Christmas cards.

It's only one of many ironies in the earthly life of our Lord – but it's an important one. I mean, the reason that Mary and Joseph have come to Bethlehem is because it's David's town, the birthplace of the greatest king in Israel's history. You remember David. He was the shepherd boy whom the Lord chose to be king of his people Israel. The funny thing was that he was the last person anyone would have chosen for the job. Even his own father, Jesse, didn't give David a thought when the prophet Samuel came and told him that God had chosen one of his sons to be the king. Jesse proudly paraded his seven older sons before the prophet, all strapping young men with good looks, quick wits, and strong shoulders. The Lord rejected them all to the surprise of everyone. Finally, the exasperated prophet said to Jesse, "Haven't you got any more sons?" Jesse replied, "No ... well, there's little David, the grubby, freckle-faced runt of the litter who's out taking care of the sheep; but you can't possibly want him." The prophet said, "Go fetch him. That "little runt" is your next king." So it happened that the Lord raised David up from obscurity even in his own family, took him out of the sheep pen, out of dusty little Bethlehem, and eventually gave him a grand palace in the city of Jerusalem from which he reigned over Israel at the height of its earthly glory.

Ten centuries later, Joseph, who is of the house and royal line of David, has brought his tiny family back to this sleepy village because this is where he must register for the census – the census Caesar Augustus has commanded be taken to ensure he's getting all the taxes he has coming from *his* kingdom that extends over an area and population a thousand times greater than that of David's. And so, in what is a curious reversal, Jesus, the long promised and infinitely more glorious king in David's line, the One the Lord said would rule forever over a kingdom – a kingdom that will make even the empire of Caesar Augustus look like a nest of beetles in a dung heap – this king goes from his splendor in heaven above to David's humble boyhood home – the place from which David had been raised up from nothing. Now the true King goes to lower than nothing – specifically to a bed of straw precariously raised by slender shafts of wood just a few inches above the smelly muck on the floor of a sheep pen. It's no place for any infant, much less the One who is the Lord of glory; but here he is out with the animals because even in the lowly village of Bethlehem, there's no other place for Jesus.

... No place for Jesus in the town where the prophets said he would be born, no place for Jesus in the nation that had been praying for his coming for two thousand years, no place for Jesus in the homes, the hearts, or the minds of God's chosen people. They all crowded him out with their worldly cares and personal concerns and pushed him away to the farthest and darkest fringes of their existence.

Some things never change; for here we are two thousand years later living in a nation and culture that purports to be generally Christian, and yet it's trying for all its worth to push the same Jesus out of the very holy day the Christian church created to celebrate his birth. Now

more than ever there are those who are intent on making sure everyone else conforms with their point of view that there is no place for Christ in Christmas. Whether it's political correctness run amok, school officials and community politicians trying to avoid lawsuits, or a certain left leaning legal organization promoting its rather strange vision of what American liberty should be (a liberty that says, "You can't do this. Don't even think of doing that. And don't you dare say publicly any of the following religious words...")—anyway, for whatever their reasons, now we are being instructed to say "holiday trees" rather than "Christmas trees", and store employees whose businesses depend on Christmas shopping to put them in the black are told to say "Season's greetings" to their customers rather than "Merry Christmas"; meanwhile schools are having "Winter Music Assemblies" rather than "Christmas Programs", and in some places they're even taking Christ out of the Christmas carols people sing.

But then, this shouldn't surprise us, nor do I think we should be discouraged by it. I mean it really isn't the job of public schools, politicians, the sellers of merchandise, or the community at large to promote the Christian faith. So, when they cave in to the voices of those who are offended by the name of Christ, it doesn't bother me. In fact, as far as I'm concerned, it helps highlight the distinction between on one hand the world at large that is either openly hostile to Jesus or that only pays him lip service, imagining themselves to be Christian simply because they set up a tree and exchange gifts on December 25th, and on the other hand, the community of Christ's truly faithful people – that is, the church—*that's* where I expect the name of Christ to be upheld. So, if I'm looking to be discouraged by people taking Christ out of Christmas, that's where I'll look: in the church; and sadly, even there, there is much to be discouraged about. It didn't happen this time around, but it's disappointing to see how many congregations cancel their services on those years when Christmas falls on Sunday. Why? Because, they say, "Christmas is family time." Funny, I would expect churches to say that Christmas had something to do with *Christ*, a time when the people of God stand in awe of the mystery of his incarnation and praise the Father for sending his Son into the world – and all the more so when Christmas falls on Sunday, the day we regularly gather for worship; but no, Christmas dinners and gifts exchanges with the family have been deemed more important and so have crowded Jesus out of his place even in the Church.

But it happens in many congregations that do hold Christmas services – like we are today – that Christ gets crowded out. As part of my work, I read or listen to a lot of sermons online. Much of what I encounter is truly frightful. Christmas, I'll see over and over again, is not so much about the birth of the Savior, God being born in flesh, but about other things. You name it: various social causes: a woman's right to choose, for example, like Mary did. She chose to carry through with her "unexpected" pregnancy, but – at least according to one sermon I read – the Lord would have been just as pleased with her if she had chosen to destroy the Christ child in her womb. What matters is that she got to make her own decision. Other topics: homelessness, unfair taxation, how God wants to make you rich and successful ... I even read one about how Christmas should be about fighting racism. Have you noticed that in almost all of those little nativity scenes that Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus are portrayed as white? Hang your heads in shame!

But let's bring it closer to home, shall we? I mean it's awfully easy to point fingers at the Grinches at the ACLU, and all those atheists, non-Christians, *nominal* Christians, politically correct politicians and school boards – along with churches closed on Sunday Christmases and those churches with terrible Christmas messages – all of whom could be accused of crowding out Christ and leaving no place for him in Christmas; but what about us? What about you? Just a bit ago we sang to Christ our Lord, "Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today" ... I

wonder, what sort of place have you and I prepared for the King of Glory whose birth we are celebrating?

If you could envision your life, your efforts, energies, and priorities as a house, which room would be the one for Jesus? Where, effectively speaking, would he be staying? Would it be the entry? That place from which you stand and meet visitors at the door, you on the inside of the threshold and whoever it is that's standing there outside on the porch? How often does it happen that you know Jesus is asking to come in and you leave him standing out there, "No thanks, I haven't got time or place for you today"? Or better yet, when you peek from behind the curtains, see who it is, and pretend not to be home? And who knows, you might do this because you don't want to give him the time today, or because you look around the place, see it's a mess, and don't want him to see it that way.

Or maybe the place for Jesus is the living room or rec room, wherever it is you've got the family TV. Have you noticed how sometimes kids will have their friends over at the house just to watch TV together or maybe to play video games? There's no real interaction taking place between them. All their attention is glued to the screen. I wonder if sometimes Jesus is that kind of guest in our lives. "Oh yeah, Jesus is here, right here beside me; I'm just ignoring him." Or maybe it's the dining room, where he's invited to meals in prayer and then it's promptly forgotten that he, the true host of the meal, is a guest at the table.

Or maybe Jesus is the visitor who gets the special treatment. We'll put him in the guest room, the one nobody ever goes into except to dust and clean. The one with the fancy new bed linens and its own private bath – the place that's all for show and that has very little to do with the way we really live. Or perhaps the place for Jesus is in the attic, in a box of memories that we pull out and look at once in a blue moon when we're feeling nostalgic. Maybe he's in the utility closet – stored away, but handy, sort of like the mop and bucket that we pull out only when we've really managed to make a mess of our lives.

I could go on naming different rooms, but I'm sure you get the point. At various times, the behaviors I'm describing can be said of all of us; and when they are, we too are guilty of crowding the Lord out of where he properly belongs in our lives and assigning him to a place that really is no place for him. To go a step farther, I think a big reason we do this is because we often live with a skewed perception of what kind of guest he is – or that he wants to be in our lives. We think sometimes that his coming means a big hassle for me. His knock at the door is about as welcome as one from the Jehovah's witnesses. He wants to talk about religious stuff – and who's got time for that? "Look, I know what I believe about you and that's enough. Now just go away, leave me alone, and don't bother me anymore. You're my Savior. What else do I need to know?" Or other times the perception may be that his coming means he wants something from me. I mean, he is the Lord, after all. And so, while he's here I'm going to have to jump through hoops to try to please him. So, I'll bring out my best behavior, shower him with the best I can afford, and put up the act of perfect hospitality for as long as I can – all the while secretly hoping his visit doesn't last longer than I can maintain the façade.

If we saw him differently, the way he really is, we'd be much more willing to let him come in and find his own place in our lives. That's exactly what we get in the Christmas story. In it, God himself chose his place in the world. There is a message for us in the place of his choosing. He didn't come to a palace in a great city. He didn't come to one of the fine houses in Bethlehem – or even to one of the humbler ones. He came to a rickety shed in a filthy sheep pen. He chose a place held up on wooden shafts just a few inches above a stinking mess. That mess is a picture of the sin on your soul – and the manger in which his body was held is a

picture of the cross on which he would be slain. With this in mind, we see that he comes to cleanse us – to die as the sacrifice for our sin and to free us from its curse. His knock at the door means that he's here to get to work. Imagine the doorbell ringing, and when you answer it there's a whole cleaning crew there. They want to clean your house, top to bottom – and no charge. It's a gift. What would you do? I, for one, would take them to the messiest places first. *That's* the place for Jesus in your life.

But there's more than cleaning going on. I think it's important to see that when God becomes flesh, he comes as the (adopted) son of a carpenter to be trained as a carpenter. The message is that he's not just here to clean, but also to build. Imagine now the doorbell ringing and this time it's a home building crew. They're here to fix your home up right: new wiring, new plumbing, bigger, wider, more energy efficient windows, you name it – oh yes, and they build cabinets and furniture too. Again, no charge for their services. So, what would you do? I'd say hand them the key and say, "Let's get on it". That's what Christ's coming means. He's not here to take places from you – he's here to build a place for you: a new, glorious, and everlasting place in the kingdom of God. He's here to furnish the rooms of your life with meaning and purpose now. And yes, it'll mean knocking down some walls, and raising a lot of dust – but the end result will be more than worth it.

Dear friends, today – as I'm sure they will for years – the arguments rage on. Well-intentioned Christian people are fighting to keep Christ in public displays of Christmas piety. They believe it's essential to witness Christ to the world in such ways. Let me suggest something better. A plastic, internally-lighted, image of a baby in a crèche on the courthouse lawn is really no place for Jesus. If we want to show Christ to the world, we should do it by giving him the place he seeks in our lives, and letting him live through us, cleansing us of our sin and building us up in faith, love, and hope. That's the place for Jesus. This Christmas and every day that follows, may our gracious God and Father give us the grace to let him in to the place he belongs. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!