

## **This Demented Inn**

Sunday, 21 December, 2014; ds. Don Mader

Scripture lesson: Luke 2:6-7

One of the most haunting images in Christmas poetry I know is a verse by the late poet/mystic, Father Thomas Merton. He writes

Into this world, this demented inn,  
In which there is absolutely no room for him at all,  
Christ comes uninvited.

The image of our world as a “demented inn” where we temporarily lodge has been so strongly present throughout 2014, and as I was beginning preparations for this service a month ago, a picture appeared in the media which seemed to so strongly sum that up that I instantly decided it had to be part of my reflections: the Reuters news photo of riot police massed on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, in the United States, under the Christmas lights, after the grand jury's refusal to indict a police officer for the killing of an unarmed black teenager.

This is far from a localized picture in either time or place. To take the elements one at a time, beginning with the lower half, of the police in their black uniforms. They are police in Missouri, but could equally be the police in Hong Kong, massing to clear demonstrators there. Or, because they are so highly militarized in their gear, they could equally stand for the American troops in Afghanistan, or back in Iraq 3.0, or either side in the Ukraine. Indeed, colour of their black uniforms – increasingly being adopted by police everywhere – links them with the black uniforms of the jihadis and the Islamic State. In our culture black has long been the colour of fear and terror; a century ago it was the colour of the anarchist flag. But the anarchist flags hanging out from Amsterdam squats a couple of decades ago seem almost cuddly today, compared with 2014 and the terror and fear that jihadis – and police – increasingly believe they should inspire. These figures become, then, symbolic of all the violence that has wracked the world this past year.

The ironic contrast with the lights in the top half is equally universal. On one hand, they are linked with the Christian season of Christmastide, with its angelic message of “peace, to men of good will”. But that has long since ceased to be their primary reference: they are now inseparably linked to the commercialised Christmas that Ferlinghetti was already decrying a half-century ago in his “Christ Climbed Down”, and that Tom Lehrer spoofed in his 1960's carol “Hark, the *Herald Tribune* sings, 'Now it's time to buy some things!’” But at a still larger level they connect with our universal human need to distract ourselves from our predicament with things, with entertainment. W.H. Auden caught that condition, our human condition, so accurately in his lines in “September 1, 1939”, written on the eve of World War II:

Faces along the bar  
cling to their average day;  
the lights must never go out,  
the music must always play...  
Lest we should see who we are,  
lost in a haunted wood,  
children afraid of the night  
who have never been happy or good...

I can't tell you this far a fact, but knowing America I suspect that the piped-in Christmas music continued to play through the loud speakers even as the police massed under the lights. But even if it did not, this is a picture that fits not just the lights and music and forced levity of Christmas parties, though the first lines suit the season so well, or just the world on the eve of one of its previous disasters, but our own world, constantly.

We are no more ready to make room for the Christ today than was the inn-keeper in Bethlehem. The image of that inn is indeed potent: more than merely an historical no-vacancy sign, it is an image for our sorry, demented world, and for our stuffed-full but still empty lives.

For we are still too busy seeking to be entertained, running after 'the good things in life', seeking to enjoy ourselves – if the truth be told, seeking to escape ourselves – to hear the Christ say, “Blessed are those who mourn,” blessed are those who are prepared to feel the pain of other's as their own.

We are still too busy asserting ourselves, insisting on our prerogatives, piling up the things which will ultimately bury us, enjoying the fleeting power and status they give us, to hear Him say, “Blessed are the meek”.

We are too busy with ourselves to hear the cry of the poor, the dispossessed, the oppressed, the homeless – and behind that cry, His voice saying, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail...”

We are too busy making sure that we get that which we have earned, what we consider our due, what is justifiable ours, demanding exactly what we deserve, to hear Him say, “Blessed are the merciful...”

We are too busy congratulating ourselves on our pragmatism, on how we have figured out all the angles, how to massage the system to get the best deal for ourselves, to hear Him say, “Blessed are the pure in heart...”

We are too busy seeking to preserve the established order and our place in it – or on top of it, as the case may be – by might if we must, by weapons spending, military presence, more police, strengthening the boundaries of Fortress Europe, to hear him say, “Blessed are the peacemakers”, and to be reminded that true peace comes only as the fruit of justice.

We are too busy looking for the easy road, the one we can coast down, preserving our lifestyle intact, to hear Him say, “Blessed are those who suffer persecution for righteousness sake...”

We are altogether too busy in our pride, our greed, our vanity, to hear Him say, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

No, there is no more room for him in our lives and world today than there was then, in Bethlehem.

Contrast this image with the woodcut by the British artist Eric Gill (at the end of your bulletin). Am I going to be foolish enough to try to tell you that this moment of quiet wonder which it depicts, with St. Joseph, and the horse and calf and cat (Gill always puts a cat into his manger scenes!) balances, even outweighs the lights and sound and fury of the

Reuters news image?

Yes, I am. Even apart from *this* birth, thoughtful men have always felt that any birth, as an affirmation of the continuance of life beyond the forces of death and distraction in our world, was – and is – an answer to all these forces can do. In literature that idea is called the Great Chain of Being: that life (and hope) is passed on from generation to generation, from parents to children and in turn to the children's children. It was interesting to note, in the Christian literature which we studied during the course I taught this last year here at the Pauluskerk, that two of the authors – Archibald MacLeish in his “J.B.” and James Agee in his “A Death in the Family” – both call upon this idea. But the moment Gill portrays is not just any birth. This, we believe as Christians, is the moment when God decisively acted to reach out to us for our reconciliation, and entered our world, took on our human condition

There is no more room for him in our lives and world today than there was then, in Bethlehem, but God, who has always been more willing to be present with us than we have been to welcome Him, has come anyway. Perhaps he is still hidden away, as he was then in the manger. For He always comes – He comes yet – where least expected, perhaps in an abandoned garage that shelters the homeless in our cities, perhaps in a refugee camp in any number of countries, or among the victims of war huddled together in a cellar for protection. And He works in strange and unexpected places, perhaps not in our cathedrals, any more than he was a frequenter of the palaces or temple of his own day, but in insignificant congregations tucked away, in small groups, even individuals, helping bear one another's burdens, healing broken lives, binding up that which has been shattered by neglect, violence, abuse, addiction, hatred, want; not always in churchy places, but in soup kitchens where the hungry and homeless are fed, in literacy programmes where the illiterate learn to read and begin to take responsibility for their own lives; in drug and alcohol programs where broken lives are pieced back together; among those helping refugees and asylum seekers negotiate a process stacked against them; not perhaps always in great seminaries, but where a group of common people are gathered to study the word of God in homes, neighbourhoods, prisons, wherever God's word is sought. His coming is no 'quick fix' (usually involving violence), such as our politicians are always promising us; it is always the beginning of a long process; as Martin Luther King put it, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” There is a long, long way to go, but the decisive direction is set.

Are we prepared to seek God out, to hear Him, welcome Him, though our world, and indeed most of our fellows, know Him not? Will we give Him room in the inn of our lives – not just some disused space, cluttered with the left-over furniture of memories and abandoned hopes, remnants of the faith of our childhood which no longer feels quite right and is seldom entered into, not some room that is opened up once a year for a few days, or for a few hours at Christmas and Easter, but a central and abiding place, in our lives, today? For in truth, despite all the insistence about recovering the good old days in that constantly playing holiday music – dreaming of old-fashioned white Christmases and chestnuts roasting on the open fire, while riding in one-horse open sleighs – Christmas is not about the past or nostalgia, but about our future, and who or what will dominate our lives from this day on. Are we prepared to let the Christ rule in our lives? Though it place us at cross-purposes with the ways and wisdom of this world, are we prepared to seek His peace, His power, and His comfort – true life, and life abundant? Are we prepared to accept and love ourselves despite the mess that we have made of our lives, because God has accepted and forgiven us when we were ready to admit our failure? Will we accept and love ourselves, not because of what we are, or what we pretend to be, what we have accomplished and gotten for ourselves, but because God first loved us? And having invited

Him into our lives, discovered in His grace the one true reason for loving ourselves, are we prepared to love others in turn – to see the face of God in Christ in the faces of our neighbours, and to know that our neighbour includes the poor, the victims of war, discrimination, oppression, anywhere, prisoners, refugees, and give them a place in our world and our lives too?

As we light our candle in this service, each of us in this hour, I pray that it may be a sign that each of us bears away from this place, in his or her own heart and mind, the Light of the World, to shine forth in our lives – and though we will extinguish that physical candle, that we are committed to carrying that light with us to shine forth in the darkness of our world. We are each the inn-keeper of our own lives. Will we find room, first for God, and then for our neighbour?

Although the inn at Bethlehem hung out the No Vacancy sign, though the world little cared, and indeed, aside from a handful of shepherds, didn't even half notice – already the angels have appeared. He has come. Glory be to God in the highest! Amen!