

Christmas Eve Reflection – December 24, 2011

By Sr. Margaret Wick

Wisdom 18:14 – 15a, 16b

Luke 2: 12-20

We come together on this holy night to ponder the Incarnation. It is a night of profound mystery. It is a night of great simplicity. Anthropologists tell us that in many cultures stories are used to answer great questions and explain deep mysteries. Tonight as we gaze upon the crib we understand the story even though we may not fully grasp the mysterious theology of the Incarnation.

The readings that we heard give us both the story and the mystery. On the one hand, we have Luke's nativity story with its great cast of characters and vivid description of the activity. On the other hand, the reading from the book of Wisdom at the beginning of the service gives us an image that captures the mystery of this night: God's word leaping down from heaven and standing on earth while at the same time touching heaven. If we can hold this image of heaven and earth coming together in such an exciting way perhaps we can begin to grasp the mystery of the Incarnation.

As Franciscans we have a special call to help the world understand these two dimensions of the Incarnation because Francis – by his very life – connected the story and the mystery.

In Franciscan writings the Greccio crib story is very familiar. Thomas of Celano writes that the humility of the Incarnation occupied Francis' consciousness, and so he decided one Christmas to celebrate the birth of Jesus in a new way in the mountain village of Greccio. He brought in a real ox and ass and a manger of hay where mass was being celebrated – a meeting of the Incarnation and the Eucharist. In Celano's words, Francis "wished to enact the memory of that baby who was born in Bethlehem; to see as much as was possible with his own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he rested on hay." It was the story made visible.

In his reflection on Christmas, Franciscan Brother Bill Short reminds us that during the Middle Ages the focus was on the end times when God would come as judge. This would be a time of severe testing and the message was that most people would not pass the test and so would not be saved. So Francis focused on God as a helpless child, an approachable baby who could be held and cared for – not feared. This was not sentimentalism but rather a spirituality of the heart, a human way to approach the mystery of God. Murray Bodo says: "At Christmas it was the infant Christ who was born again in the hearts of all people, and it struck Francis that God came to earth as a baby so that we could have someone to care for God was now one of us. He was flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone and because He was a child we could approach Him without fear. . . . Someone to care for, someone to love . . . How much trust God had in his creatures to place Himself in our care. We came out of ourselves, if we were aware, because we now had responsibilities for God. Not only the earth to till and creation to subdue, but now God to care for."

Yes, God is standing on earth. The story of the crib makes this very clear. But what about that “touching heaven” part of the Incarnation? Last summer, in his address at the Franciscan Federation conference, Fr. Michael Blastic showed how the gospel of John was very important to Francis’ understanding of the Incarnation. He said that while Francis used Matthew, Mark and Luke to describe the emptying dimension of the Incarnation – the frail, weak and vulnerable Jesus we see in the crib story – he also saw this event as John’s gospel describes it:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace (Jn 1:14, 16)

These verses of John, Fr. Blastic says, “underline how the revelation of God in Jesus is to be understood – God is made known in the enfleshed life of the Word in the world, and that life is one of fullness and grace, and not primarily one of sacrifice and emptying These two perspectives on the Incarnation are not contradictory; they complement each other. The Incarnation as emptying reveals at the same time the fullness of God’s love in the flesh of Jesus Christ.” God is standing on earth while at the same time touching heaven.

Tonight on Christmas Eve 2011, we see the story and we know deep in our hearts the unfolding of the mystery. Each of us asks if there is room for a child to come – if we are open to care for and to love a God who is fragile and needy rather than a God who is of our own making. We embrace, too, the fullness of grace and truth that comes with making room for that child. We call it contemplation; we call it on-going conversion. It is a journey we are all making, and it is one we are making together. Gathered here with each other, we call to mind all of our sisters wherever they are. The story and the mystery are not just an individual adventure. For us, they will be found in one another.

Strengthened by each other, we can go beyond ourselves, beyond our community to find God in the Incarnation story and mystery all around us: in the lives of those who are on journeys not of their own choosing; among those who have been told there is no room, no home, no job; on the edge of towns in dwellings deemed unsuitable. It is to this world, at this time that we are called to go “in haste” as did the shepherds, to announce as did the angels the transforming message of the Incarnation – that we are called to love, to care for each other, to bring peace to the whole earth because God is with us.

Christmas blessings, Sisters, as we celebrate the humble crib and the profound mystery of the Incarnation.