

A HIDDEN COMING

I have spoken before of the picture that hangs over the desk in my study at home. It is Pieter Bruegel's, *Winter in Flanders*, and portrays a medieval country village with a half dozen assorted structures, a frozen lake and a large open court area filled with snow; and against the snow can be seen in sharp contrast the dull, earthen colors of the clothing of the various peasants that are pictured. Despite the snow all is drab—a hazy blue sky, muddy brown buildings, with people, animals and miscellaneous artifacts all done in grays and tans, some black with bits of dirty blue and rusty orange. I bought the picture years ago for the study in my first fulltime pastorate in Wooster, Ohio, and since then I have had it framed three different times, trying to get it right. First, I had a medium toned wooden frame which had a stripe of burnished orange, with which I used a muted orange matting. Then I changed the secondary color to a grayish blue. Now I think I've finally got it about right, with a dark knotty walnut frame, rough, burlap matting and a thin strip of dull beaded brass to finish the inside edge. I mention all of this because the feel of the painting is crucial to the point I want to make.

If one looks closely at the picture one can discern in the lower right-hand foreground a gray donkey being led by a man in dark clothing, and on the donkey there sits a woman in a large, grayish-blue cape. The painting also carries the alternate title, *The Census in Bethlehem*. I love this painting because it sets forth the truth of this wondrous night so convincing a manner. There is no halo over the head of the man or the woman, no special play of light drawing attention to them. They are not even at the center of the painting. The weight of the painting is rather at the large building in the lower left-hand corner, presumable an inn, in front of which a mass of people is gathered, all facing the building . . . and thus away from the donkey and the woman who sits thereon. Everyone is looking elsewhere when Madonna, great with child, arrives quietly in Bethlehem, lowly and riding on an ass.

It is just with such earthy colors and unremarkable ordinariness that St. Luke paints the picture in the first scene of tonight's Gospel. "And it came to pass," he begins, almost, "it so happened." And then he describes the decree of Caesar Augustus that all

the world should be taxed. This tells us immediately that there was one powerful enough to issue a decree that affected all the then known world, and thus points to the massive power of the throne of the vast Roman Empire that held within its grasp such provinces as this one in faraway Palestine, and subjected them to taxation and other machination of power. To the Jews this subservience must have been a reminder of the sway once held over them by Pharaoh in Egypt in the days of their bondage or of the Babylonian Captivity. The picture that is suggested is not pretty, but it is certainly very natural: an oppressive power exerting its dominance, milking the populace for all it is worth, but the unwelcomed decree served in the providence of God to bring Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, for Joseph was of the house and lineage of David, whose native village this was.

We have heard this story so often, and in the quiet setting of lovely churches festively decked with Christmas flowers, wreaths and glittering candles that we miss completely the suggestion of a real and not so lovely world. We are oblivious to the tone of bleakness and the hint of hopeless oppression, of a longing for redemption and peace, both outward and inward. In far away Palestine this proud people, God's chosen people, were under the heel of Rome and taxed at will. We sense elsewhere in the Gospels the resentment against this world-conquering power. We know how the tax-gatherers were hated, the Roman centurions despised. The oppression was deeply felt and bitterly resisted. Another census, fifty years earlier, provoked a rebellion under Judas the Galilean, the founder of the zealot party of ultra-nationalists. At least one of Jesus' disciples, Simon Zelotes, belonged to this party. So we see that Luke paints this scene with earthen colors. The setting is not bright but gray. As in the Bruegel painting, the sky is overcast. And given what we know of human nature, all of this, the world domination, the oppression, the taxation, was perfectly natural.

And it was natural under the circumstances that Joseph and Mary should journey to Bethlehem; natural that the inn, overflowing with other sojourners compelled to return to their ancestral home, should have no room; natural that Mary, being great with child, should after a long jostling ride on the donkey soon give birth; and natural that, lodging near the cattle in a stable or cave, she should lay her swaddled newborn in the soft, sweet

hay of a manger. It all had the appearance of ordinariness: “And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.”

The second scene, where the angels appear to the shepherds watching over their flocks, discloses what had in actuality taken place, of course, that which we know by faith, that unto us was born that night in the city of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord. But while the meaning of this night was disclosed to some, a precious few: to the shepherds in the field, to the Magi in the east, to Anna, waiting in the temple, and to old Simeon, days later, who took the child in his arms and uttered his *Nunc dimittis* (or as Bach had it in his lovely cantata, “*Ich habe genug*,” “It is enough”), it is important to remember how inconspicuous was our Lord’s arrival, how totally unnoticed, except by those few. St. Cyril of Jerusalem in his catechetical instruction spoke of the first and second comings of Christ, describing them thusly: “There is a hidden coming, like that of rain on fleece, and a coming before all eyes, still in the future.” The second coming will be seen by all, the first was seen by none, save his blessed mother and father. The first coming was like that of rain on fleece (a wonderful metaphor), virtually undetectable. It happened, of course, but no one noticed. As in the Bruegel painting, all were looking elsewhere.

There is one other subtle point made by St. Luke in this first scene. There at the beginning is the brief reference to Caesar Augustus and his decree subjecting all the world to taxation, and then at the end the simple picture of the newborn babe lying in a manger. World dominion and a baby for whom there was no room. Absolute power and perfect weakness. Pompous pride and sweet humility. Luke could not have known, as we know, that in time not only would the great Caesar die, as all men do, but that the glorious Roman Empire would be matter of ancient history, while the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ would exert its blessed dominion over joyful hearts around a world much, much larger than that which was known at the time. Luke would not have been surprised, however, for he had already recorded the words of Mary’s *Magnificat*: “He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away” (Lk. 1:51-53).

That's why I love that painting so. It speaks to me of the quietness of God's grace, of how he entered this world in greatest humility in the form of the Christ-child, no thunder from heaven, no bright lights, no blare of trumpets. Three times over in Luke chapter two is there reference to the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger, and thus is its significance trebly underscored. It is mentioned immediately after Mary gives birth, of course, at the end of Scene One. But in Scene Two, after the angels announce to the shepherds the good tiding of great joy, they say, "And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." This is the great sign of God's gift of salvation, a new baby is wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a feeding trough for animals! And then in Scene Three, after the angels leave, the shepherds go to Bethlehem, which was but two miles away. Luke describes the visit simply: "And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger." That was why they came, the total purpose of their visit: to see the baby in a manger. There in the quiet of the stable there had appeared no angels, no glory of the Lord shown round about them. There was no singing of *Gloria in Excelsis*—only a peaceful birth, a brief cry from the newborn and the gentle mooing of cows.

"A hidden coming, like that of rain on fleece." A donkey and its rider slipping quietly into the village, unnoticed, . . . the people looking the other way. "*Winter in Flanders*" or "*The Census in Bethlehem*." Only the eye of faith knows the difference. Phillips Brooks said it well, of course:

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!
 So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
 No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
 Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on Christmas Eve and Day, December 24-25, 2009. Copyright © 2009.