

A Post-Christmas Reflection

Perhaps it's just a sign of age, but every year I find the Christmas story more emotionally power-packed than the year before.

Sure, its celebration has been grossly commercialized, cheapened by over-decoration, by slickly packaged for movies and TV, and even declared illegal in government buildings. It's been badly eclipsed by the charming 19th century fairy story a New England father wrote for his children. But – so far, at least – it hasn't been completely stifled. Just when it seems about to be replaced by its own trappings, the real story shines through again: a section of The Messiah on the radio, the words of a carol in a shopping mall, a picture on a greeting card, or Linus' moving recital of Luke 2 in Charley Brown's Christmas.

What hit me this year harder than ever before was how the central characters of that story are such absolutely ordinary folk going about their everyday lives, and how its message is so clearly for us ordinary folk going about our everyday lives. We now think of Mary and Joseph as saints, but to their friends and relatives they were no different from thousands of other pious Jews awaiting the coming of the Messiah. The baby Jesus looked and behaved like any other newborn. The business about the birth being in a stable, and their having to use a manger for a crib, shows how far they were from being celebrities.

To be sure, the birth itself was a miracle. But at the time only Mary and Joseph knew that. The only other thing that was out of the ordinary was the appearance of angels to announce the birth. And look where they went to do it! They didn't go to Rome to talk with the Emperor, or to Jerusalem to discuss theology with the Chief Priest; they didn't appear to the loyal Jewish underground seeking to overthrow oppressive Roman rule, or to historians to make sure all was recorded properly. Instead they went a couple of Joe Average blue-collar workers who'd pulled the night shift on a Judean hillside – men who are not even named in the story!

By having the angels declare the Great Gift from heaven in this way God shows us just what he thinks of human power, fame, wealth, pomp, and wisdom. He says, in effect, that since his gift is to all people it just won't matter which ones he picks to be the representative recipients of his birth announcement.

Every year I feel more like a shepherd.

Roy Clouser