

Christmas Sermon Father Michael Fleming

We are living in a most difficult and confusing time, aren't we: all we hear and read about is this dreadful pandemic and the news seems to get only darker and darker. There does not seem to be any light on the horizon and we are all frankly sick unto death of living like we are. Even moments which should give us great joy are edged in shadows and we don't know where to turn or how to find hope in the midst of all this chaos.

It was so in Palestine some two thousand years ago. Dominated and manipulated by an invading force, the peasants of the land were like dead persons walking, fearful that at any moment and around any corner Roman soldiers would appear and take them from family and friends. And now, they wanted a head count for some reason and thus did the edict go forth that everyone should return to the ancestral home of their clan to be registered. Even though everyone knew that the census would mean nothing and the amassed figures would sit on some bureaucrat's desk in Rome and simply gather dust, they knew that disobedience would bring down the wrath of the gods under the defenceless nation. And this did a carpenter from Nazara named Joseph journey with his most pregnant spouse through the hills and valleys skirting the Jordan wilderness towards the village from whence his ancestors had journeyed into the world, the place named Place of Bread or in Hebrew Bethlehem.

In that place, where chaos and confusion reigned supreme the night of their arrival, they found shelter not in a respectable place of retirement, but in a cave behind a local tavern which was used as a storehouse and barn for the neighbourhood cows, goats, sheep and chickens. It was there that nature took her course and a child was born. Aided by the keeper's wife as midwife, she, named Mary, endured all the pain and travail of labour until a male child was born whom they laid in a feeding trough. What began as a singular journey of birthing turned into a circus as shepherds from the hills appeared, bearing with them news that they had heard a Voice which told them to "come and see" what was happening in the sleeping village below. They came, they saw and they were captured by the innocence of the babe named Jesus. One

shepherd took his cloak made of lamb's wool and gave it to Mary who wrapped her son in its sheltering warmth. Others from the village came as the midwife spread the news that there was one more number to be added to the accounting – strangers came, saw and they too were conquered. Both excited and exhausted by the evening's event, Mary and Joseph convinced the gathering that the greatest gift they could give their newborn was that of silence and solitude so he could rest on his mother's breast and sleep.

As first dawn spread her fingers across the mouth of the cave and then painted the stone walls with a rainbow of colours, Mary woke and just sat there, looking with wonder at the wee one so peacefully sleeping. She unswaddled him and took his oh so small hand in hers and began to sing the lullaby's her mother had sang to her and her mother's mother and her mother's mother – songs of dancing brooks and rolling hills covered in primroses, of sunrises on the Galilee and sunsets in the Sinai, of what was and what was to be, songs of hope and promise and , as Luke wrote, “pondered all these things in her heart”. She was to do this for the rest of her child's life, watching him grow from the terrible twos to the tragic thirties and always asking, “what does this mean and why was I the chosen one to bear such light and darkness into a waiting world?”

This is what we ask at Christmas – what child is this and why have we been so blessed by God by the baby's presence. How do we find Bethlehem again so we can simply stand in the presence of the divine and “taste and see that the Lord is good” ? At the beginning of our service, I sang part of a carol my mother and father wrote many years ago as a present for all their friends and family, a gift they re-created for more than thirty years: it asked that God “show me the way to the manger” and we still seek the road that takes us home to the One born in such poverty and weakness. Now, I sing the last verse of this carol:..... May your Christmas be a blessed time of hope, love and peace and may you feel the rising sun on your face and in your heart....Alleluia!