

December 25 – Christmas Mass at Dawn

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Isaiah 62:11-12	“They shall be called the holy people, the redeemed of the Lord...”
Psalms 97:1, 6, 11-12	“Light dawns for the just; gladness, for the honest of heart.”
Titus 3:4-7	The savior appeared so that we might “become heirs in hope of eternal life.”
Luke: 15-20	Visit of the shepherds

In many Christmas gospel readings we hear about the shepherds and their visit to the infant Jesus and so in almost every manger scene they have a very prominent place. Until I came to Cambodia, I had a hazy picture of what shepherds do and tended to romanticize their work as if it resembled a scene from a pastoral painting. But in most societies, including Cambodia where I work, the reality is a very different picture. Early in the morning I see the shepherds walking their little flocks to graze in the fields near the shelter where I work. At around five in the evening they again lead the cows or goats past our shelter gate to put them in small wooden lean-tos for the night.

Many of these shepherds are young boys – from 10 to 18 years of age from poor families who are employed to look after the flocks of better off families. The shepherds I see are usually thin, and wear flip-flops, shorts and shirts without buttons which clearly haven’t been washed in a while. Their poverty is obvious and their lack of education and opportunity is implied in the kind of work they do. Watching the cows and goats grazing is tedious, numbing work without a future. There’s no career path for shepherds.

I think the shepherds in today’s Christmas gospel reading came from the same kind of background as the shepherds in Cambodia. They are without rank and station in life - lowly people – yet it is to the likes of these people that God sent the angels to announce the Glad Tiding of the Birth of the Messiah. The angel was not sent to King Herod or to the Pharisees.

The lowly shepherds received the angel’s message with open hearts that overcame their initial fear. They then went without hesitation to see the sign the angel had foretold – “an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” Like other people of their time who were awaiting the coming of the Messiah, none of them expected the great messiah – the savior of Israel to come as an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes. But when they heard the message of the angel they believed so deeply that they recounted the message to Mary and Joseph. Mary too was open to the word of God and recognized it when it was spoken to her by these simple shepherds just as she recognized the word of God in the voice of the angel at the Annunciation who told her that she would give birth to the Messiah.

The shepherds who pass our shelter each day have no way of knowing that inside our shelter there are other young women like Mary who have no where to give birth and so enter our unmarked shelter. Recently one of them, Sina, a 12-year old girl from a distant province who had been raped and was in her eighth month of pregnancy, made the journey to our shelter accompanied by her grandmother. The rest of her family wanted to hide her away as she brought disgrace to them among relatives

and neighbors and made it clear that she could not return home with the baby. For me, the vulnerability of this young woman which was so like Mary's confers on today's gospel a new depth of meaning that goes beyond the romanticized Christmas scenes in greeting cards and mangers in our churches. God is born today, right in our neighborhoods, towns and cities among the most vulnerable and wounded.

The gospel of today's Christmas Dawn Mass so clearly manifests how God turns our personal and societal values up side down by coming not as a prince or Roman governor possessing political clout, economic resources or military might but as a helpless infant who is poor, landless, homeless and whose mother was without birth attendants. We think of so many in our society who like the newborn Jesus also lack these basic necessities of a home, healthcare and education. The angels' announcement of the birth of the Messiah to the lowly shepherds and in the lowly birth of Jesus in a stable we recognize God's special care for those who are hurting in our world.

Will we let our world be turned up side down as did the shepherds who received the joyous news of Jesus birth with open hearts? Are we open to the message of today's gospel that God has a special care for the poor shepherd boys of our world, for the vulnerable child born of a violated mother and for other vulnerable people? Today God is calling us to share and manifest this same special care in our homes, in our neighborhoods and in our world. Let us pray that when we hear today's gospel we, like the shepherds, will return home "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."

While the election ended in November, our work must continue. It is important to put our concerns for people living in forgotten communities around the globe before President-elect Obama and the new House and Senate. Read Maryknoll's important policy goals outline in "Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world" and schedule an appointment with your new representatives today.

Email for a copy (ogc@maryknoll.org), or find the election guide here:
www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm

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