

Christmas Prayer 2009



*Celebrating 225 years
since Nano Nagle's Death*



For private circulation only

International Presentation Association 2009

Prayer Setting: A Christmas Crib, a picture of Nano, a lantern, a small jug of milk, a small dish of honey and a dish of seeds, preferably in the centre of the group.

Leader:

Christmas Eve is a special feast for all Christians. The Christian celebration of Jesus' birth has persisted for 2,000 years even though in our times it's easy to lose sight of the birth of Jesus and focus more on Santa Claus and consumerism. Christmas has become a commercial juggernaut. Instead of a time of reflection, reaching out to all, especially the most needy, and celebrating God's gracious gift of God's self in Jesus, we become stressed with shopping and planning and meeting expectations of family and friends. Christmas celebrates and displays all that is good about the human spirit; but its dark side is craving, greed, acquisitiveness, selfishness and gluttony. It is good to come back to the original story of the birth of Jesus in the poverty of a stable surrounded by those on the margins of society. Gustavo Gutierrez reflects on the significance of this simple story:

He was born in Bethlehem, "one of the little clans of Judah" (Mi. 5:1), where at his birth he was surrounded by shepherds and their flocks. His parents had come to a stable after vainly knocking at numerous doors in the town, as the Gospels tell us; ... There, on the fringe of society, the Word became history, contingency, solidarity, and weakness; but we can say, too, that by this becoming, history itself, our history, became Word.

It is often said at Christmas that Jesus is born into every family and every heart. But these "births" must not make us forget the primordial, massive fact that Jesus was born of Mary among a people that at the time were dominated by the greatest empire of the age. If we forget that fact, the birth of Jesus becomes an abstraction, a symbol, a cipher. Apart from its historical coordinates the event loses its meaning. To the eyes of Christians the Incarnation is the irruption of God into human history: an incarnation into littleness and service in the midst of overbearing power exercised by the mighty of this world; an irruption that smells of the stable.



Nativity by Julie Lonneman

Christmas Eve is also a special feast for Presentations as it recalls an annual ritual that was dear to the heart of Nano and the early Presentation communities. This ritual is a communal memory of an act of hospitality that is more than a benign welcoming. Nano's act of feeding and serving the fifty beggars was an act of social reversal, a symbol of the inclusion of all and welcome of all at God's table in the kin-dom of God.

Quiet Reflection

Hospitality ... means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.

Henri Nouwen

All pray: *(as the lantern is held up)*

O Sacred Light,
Jesus the Light of the World was born as one of us
and shared the glory and the burden of our humanity.
O Sacred Light, you guided Nano Nagle in her passionate commitment
to those who were poor and oppressed.
We lift to you the unenlightened corners of our world
where people cringe beneath the weight of darkness
- poverty, homelessness, despair, hunger, unemployment, war.
Illuminate the shadows of injustice.
Let our hearts burn within us with a desire for justice and with the courage
to confront injustice and our collusion with the oppressor.
O Sacred Fire of Justice, burn within us and within our world.

Quiet Reflection

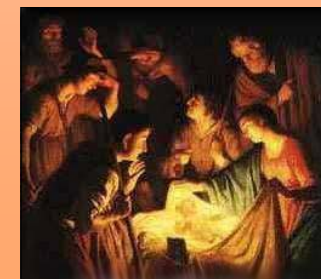
Born in a stable, hailed only by shepherds, offered in the temple as a child of poor parents, hunted by a bloodthirsty despot - Jesus from the beginning shares the lot of those on the extreme periphery, those who do not count for much.

To grasp the full meaning of Christmas perhaps we should go, at least in our minds and imagination, to the periphery of our world to find those most marginalised. They are many, indeed a majority. We marginalise them even further by the names we give them ...

The Christmas event contains within itself a call to conversion, to change, for all Christians. It calls us to give witness in our lives to the truth we celebrate. It was a call to love, to brotherhood and sisterhood. Above all, he came to bring good news to the poor.

Noel Kerins, Columban priest

Conclude the prayer by blessing each other with milk or honey or seed or light and then by once again greeting each other with the gesture of Namaste.



places have been filled, is a tender God. And the good news is that no one has to wait until the last day before they can relate to God as a concerned and gracious host; Jesus asks everyone to relate to God in that image *now*. Somewhere there is a God who is waiting for those invitations to be honoured if people could see that they are invited to the banquet. Now. ... it is the beggar and the cripple who are invited to the kingdom of heaven. If people share their table with the crippled, then they, as crippled hosts, will be honoured in the kingdom of heaven. It is not a matter of the clean inviting the unclean, of the healthy inviting the crippled: it is more a matter of the crippled sharing their table with the crippled, of beggars sharing their food with other beggars. For when it comes to the Kingdom of God, who can assume the place of honour at the table? Who can suppose that they do not belong to the large human company of the maimed, the lame and the blind?

The Gospel of Luke A Reflective Commentary, Denis McBride (Dominican Publications)

All pray: (as the jug of milk and the dish of honey are held up)

O Maker of milk and honey,
and all the sweet abundance promised for the new creation,
give us sustenance in our efforts to bring about systemic change
with and on behalf of those who are poor and powerless.
Look with special tenderness on those who are disadvantaged,
on those who are forced to go without because of the greed of others,
on those who must scrape to make ends meet
while others amass more than they can use.
Maker of milk and honey,
sustain us in our efforts to be radical in our hospitality,
generous in our giving and honest about our own avarice and greed.
Keep us focussed in our efforts to shape our political and social reality
according to the principles in Jesus' story of the Great Banquet.

Reading 3

Fifty beggars were the company invited. She did not sit at the head of her table, to do the honours of it in the usual way; but she brought in the first dish with her own hands, stood behind their chairs while they enjoyed themselves at dinner, and helped to attend them as their menial servant; her faith strongly representing to her the great Patron of the poor, who on that day made his first appearance among men, and who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister. She observed this same ceremony every Christmas-day while she lived, which custom is since faithfully kept up by the Ladies of her house, as it is to be while ever their Community shall have an existence.



Let us ritualise this welcome to all by greeting each other with the Namaste greeting. The gesture of Namaste is a simple act made by bringing together both palms of the hands before the heart, and lightly bowing the head. In fact it is said that in Namaste the hands are put together like a knife so that people may cut through all differences that may exist, and immediately get to the shared ground that is common to all peoples of all cultures. Namaste recognises the equality of all, and pays honour to the sacredness of all. Simply put, Namaste means:

The God in me greets the God in you;
The Spirit in me meets the same Spirit in you.

Let us now greet each other and symbolically greet all people and the whole community of life with Namaste.

Hymn: As the hymn is sung or listened to, raise the lantern, the milk, the honey and the seeds.

Let us be attentive!
Let us open our minds and our hearts to hear the good news.
All life is holy. All life is sacred.
Holy is the essence of all things.
Matter is holy. Matter is sacred.
Behold the Holy One.

All praise to the Holy hidden in all things.
Praise for sister matter, the dwelling place of Spirit.
Praise for water, air, soil, and fire, elements imbued with soul.
Praise for creatures great and small whose being reflects the Divine. (Refrain)
Praise for trees and shrubs and grass with whom Holy Breath we exchange.
Praise for the Sacred Universe in whom all beings share communion.
Praise for Mother Earth, our home the fruit of her flesh becomes our own.
All praise for the Holy hidden in all things. (Refrain)

Jan Novotka, *In the Name of All That Is*, No. 6

Reading 1

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirin'ius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was



engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

Quiet Reflection

Since Christmas illustrates how God sides with the poor in order to liberate the oppressed from poverty and injustice, it calls us to reject greed, give away our money and possessions to those in need, and also live in solidarity with the disenfranchised.

Christmas pushes us to stand on the margins of society, where we will find God. Christmas announces that every human being is a beloved son and daughter of the God of love. Every human life is beautiful in the eyes of God, since God has become one of us. From now on, we reject exclusivity, racism, sexism, and discrimination of any kind, and embrace everyone as equal. We stand on the margins with the excluded, the marginalised, the outsiders and outcasts. From there, we envision a new reconciled humanity.

John Dear SJ

All pray: *(as the dish of seeds is held up)*

O Sower of the Seeds of life and of welcome,
in an act of gracious hospitality you sent your Son to become one of us
and to share the burden of our humanity.
You sent your Son not as king but as a vulnerable child
on the margins of society,

in the poverty of a stable and welcomed by shepherds.
Sow within us a passion for your transformative dream for all creation.
Bless us as we work to sow the seeds of justice and of peace,
of freedom and of promise.
Bless us as we work to address the root causes of poverty
by confronting personal and corporate greed.
Bless us as we sow the seeds of transformation
- in our hearts and in our social structures.

Reading 2

The Great Banquet

When one of those who sat at table with him heard this, he said to him, "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But Jesus said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for all is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuse. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it; I pray you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them; I pray you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant came and reported this to his master. Then the householder in anger said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and the lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"

Luke 14:15-24

Quiet Reflection

The underlying image which Jesus presents is of a God who is hungry for table-company, a God who will not sit down at table and start the banquet until all the places have been filled. Unlike Dives in the parable of the rich man, the host is not someone who is happy to feast sumptuously at his table while ignoring the cripple at his gate. God does not care for dining alone; [God] is concerned to have table fellowship with others, and so is generous in the invitations. God is moved to invite, to send a servant to the shabby and the broken, to those who are regarded as ritually unclean because of their physical deformities, to persuade those who take refuge in the shadows of the forgotten alleyways of the world to come home and join God's company. God is lonely in God's kin-dom for the company of others at his table. And a God who is hungry for human company, who will postpone the party until all the



Mary Southard csj