



Our part in the Christmas Story

By RICHARD E. RUGGLE
Saint Paul's Church, Norval

We poor human creatures sometimes lose our way on our pilgrimage through earth. We wonder what life is all about; we feel confused, and alone, and uncertain. And yet, whether we've lived on the surface of this world for five years or for 75 years, Christmas seems to spark the rebirth of hope within us. The light that shines through the church windows on Christmas eve is a reflection of the stable lamp that lit the manger long ago. Both remind us how Jesus was, as one of the gospel writers said, 'the light of the world'. Our celebration of Christmas points us to a ray of hope in a dark world.

Time stands still. Just as the eternal God stepped into time two thousand years ago, so too

we seem for a brief moment to enter eternity. In our hearts and minds, we go back to Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, and the Babe lying in a manger. As we hear again the story of Jesus' birth, as we sing the carols, as we gaze on the nativity scene, we imagine ourselves there.

And like the children in the Sunday school pageants, we too have our parts to play. Are you like Mary? - who doesn't quite understand what the angel has told her, but is willing to put her trust in God, and replies to the angel's news, 'be it unto me according to thy will'.

Or perhaps you are like the distant Roman governor Quirinius registering people for the census, or like the innkeeper right where it's happening, deal-

ing with the crowd in town - both busy with their work, and both unconscious of the great event which will change the course of history.

Maybe you are one of the shepherds. Usually they had to abide in the fields, to keep watch over their flocks by night (they had to work when others normally went to services). But this night was different, and they were prompted to speed to Mary and Joseph, and to the babe lying in the manger, and their fear was changed to wonder and joy.

Or you might worry like Herod that this Jesus will upset your comfort and power, and try to rid yourself of him.

You may even, like the sages, have spent your years searching the world's wisdom, and find its meaning in giving yourself to the infant son of God.

At different moments, and as the years go by, we find ourselves fitting now one part better, now another. But whatever role seems to suit us, the gospel tells us that if we want to see ourselves we must look - not at the players at the edge of the scene - but at the baby in the centre, at the Word made flesh.

For there is the picture of how God intends us to be, of the new Adam, of the pattern for mankind. The pattern was always there, even before the beginning of time: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. It lay behind creation: 'All things were made by him; and without

him was not any thing made that was made'. The eternal son was the source of our being and of our understanding: 'In him was life, and the life was the light of man'.

And now God goes further, and he in whose image we were made becomes one of us: 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us'. Here was God coming down to earth, and sharing our very common human existence, laid, as Luther's carol put it, on the straw that pigs and cattle were eating.

'Behold the man', Pilate said; and we see a man, 'poor, born in an outbuilding, working, praying, tempted'. He not only ate and drank; he knew hunger, thirst and weariness. Consider his bravery,

his sense of humor, his severity, his tenderness. He was human enough to weep over the woes of those he called his brothers and sisters, and he was crucified for them, dead and buried.

Yet when we look on the child, or behold the man, we cannot help but sense that here is more than just a man: 'We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten son of the Father, full of grace and truth'. The danger of our world is to lose touch with the eternal, to live in a world where we imagine that God cannot break in. And Christmas is the celebration of 'God with us', the reminder that God loves this world, and loves us.

Happy Christmas!

Hanukkah: Festival of Lights

Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, is a joyous eight-day celebration in which playing games has become an important part of the holiday. The dreidel, (a spinning top) has become in its way as much a part of Hanukkah as the Hanukkah menorah, Hanukkah's central symbol.

"Hanukkah affirms a sense of unity with all Jewry," says Sylvia Ettenberg, director of educational development at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York. "It is a season for gifts, for games and for entertainment."

Hanukkah celebrate the successful revolt of the Jews against the Seleucid Greeks (Syrians) and their king Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus forbade the Jews from following the Torah. He banned circumcision and had idols erected in the temple in Jerusalem. An elderly priest of Modin, Mattathias, and his five sons, organized a rebellion which swept aside the Syrian oppressors and led to the Jewish people's national liberation.

In 165 B.C.E. the Temple was recaptured by an army led by Judah Maccabee, the son of Mattathias. The Temple was cleansed and rededicated. The Temple menorah, the eternal flame, was relit.

As legend had it, in the process

of cleansing The Temple, only one sanctified cruse of oil was found: enough for one day. Miraculously, the oil burned for eight days, enough time for the priests to prepare more oil. Jews through the world today continue to kindle lights during this eight day period to commemorate the victory of the Maccabees and the miracle of the oil, a metaphor for the miracle of Jewish survival.

Perhaps because the Festival of Lights is observed not in the synagogue but in the home, the holiday has found its natural expression in playing games with family and friends. It often bridges the generation gap between children and parents.

"Dreidel" is probably the most popular game. It is said to have its origin in the time of Antiochus. Jews were forbidden to study Torah. At the approach of his soldiers, Jewish students would hide their books and play Dreidel, pretending they had only gathered to gamble.

This special top has a Hebrew letter on each of its four sides: num, gimmel, heh, shin, which are the acrostic for "Nes gadol hayah sham. (A great miracle happened there).

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