

Christmas. 07

Awhile ago a fellow Jesuit gave me a funny piece about Christmas. It went like this: Do you know what would have happened if the three wise men had been three wise women? The answer is that they would have asked directions and therefore would have arrived on time and helped deliver the baby. Then they would have cleaned the stable and made a casserole. And they would have brought practical gifts. Of course the Scriptures tell a very different story. The three men are late and their gifts are impractical. But we have to remember that this story is not about practicality. It is functioning on a different level, that of symbolism. Finally, if the three men had been women, there would now be peace on earth. If that last statement is true, if women bring peace, then I think we all have to vote for the one female presidential candidate. But we all know that things are not that simple. A woman president would not necessarily bring peace to our world.

Friends sent me a Christmas card this year which was so sorrowful in tone that I wondered if something terrible had happened in their lives which I did not know about: a death, a serious sickness, or something of that nature. I phoned them to find out. It turned out

that nothing of that nature had befallen them, thank God. No, the reason for the card's sad message was that they were saddened when they looked at the kind of world they were leaving to their children and grandchildren---a world of war and hunger, a world on the brink of environmental disaster. That is what made them so sad this Christmas. Certainly, these friends would vote for a woman president if they believed that she would attempt to address these world problems of war, hunger and ecological suicide.

And yet this night is the night when we think thoughts of peace. If we were asked what is the major theme of this Feast of Christmas, what would we say? I don't suppose there is only one correct answer. Some of us might say that Christmas celebrates the dignity of the human person, because it teaches us that God himself has become a human being. And if God is a human being, then humanity is a reality of great, no, the greatest dignity. Others among us might want to refine that theme by concentrating on one stage of humanity, that of infancy. Christmas, they would say, teaches us how special children are and therefore how much we should cherish and love them. And from there they would of course begin to talk about the evil of destroying children in the womb.

But there is one other theme which could also be a right answer to this question of the meaning of this feast of Christmas, and that is the theme of peace. In the first reading for this Mass we read: “For every boot that tramped in battle, every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for flames.” And why? Because “the child born to us, the son given to us... is the Prince of Peace.”

If the child whose birth we celebrate tonight is the prince of peace and we are his followers, then we must be people of peace. We must be that first of all in our own hearts. So let us ask ourselves what is disturbing the peace of our own hearts, and whatever it is, let us ask the Lord to free us from it, for we must find our way to peace if we are to be disciples of the prince of peace. We must also seek peace in our families. So let us ask the Lord for help to be at peace with parents, with children, with grandchildren, with sisters and brothers, and with relatives. Peace in families is sometimes a hard thing to achieve. But it must be our goal, our aim.

We must also be bearers of peace in the larger world. As you know, our church sees war as justified only when it is a last resort, as the only way of self-defense. Any other war is an unjust war. In the opinion of the leaders of our church, pope and bishops, the present war in which our country is engaged was not a just war.

But that is spilt milk. Or, more frightfully said but also more truly said, spilt blood. How many mothers, American and Iraqi, have stood with Mary at the feet of their dead sons. Let us pray for the end of this war. Let us pray that nations may seek other means rather than war to solve their differences. Let us teach our children that they have the right to refuse service in unjust wars. And at the same time let us pray for the young men and women of our own country and of Iraq who have died in this war and for their families who mourn their deaths. May the Prince of Peace console them in their loss and give their children a share in his Kingdom. Amen.

On this Christmas Eve let us rededicate ourselves to following Jesus, the prince of peace, in our hearts, in all our relationships, and in the larger world of war and peace. Amen.

