

Christmas Day Mass

December 25, 2011

In the spirit of Caesar Augustus I would like to take up a census this morning. How many of you have ever taken part in a Christmas pageant? Who were you? How many of you were Jesus? (Started at the top, right)? How many were Mary? Joseph? The Wise Men? Now, how about the shepherds? And the angels?

These last two roles have always struck me as great “catch-all” categories. There’s only room for one Jesus, one Mary, one Joseph, three wise men, but you can have dozens of shepherds and angels. There’s no mention of how many shepherds were out in that field. And while one of the angels gets a nice little speech, a multitude of the heavenly host leaves room for... well, a multitude.

In the past I must confess to not giving too much thought to the shepherds and the angels except as a backdrop for the main action – necessary but not all that interesting. But recently I have begun to reassess their importance. As a matter of fact, I would propose that, if God were putting an ad in Craigslist or eBay, it might very well be for shepherds and angels.

Consider the shepherds. They are described as “living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock.” The phrase “living in the fields” struck me. “Keeping night watch” tells us they were doing their job, making sure none of the sheep was sick or had wandered off and that a wolf didn’t get into the sheepfold. The work of shepherds was to give full attention to the care of the sheep. And the image of the shepherd was used for the king, going back to David, the shepherd-king. The prophet Ezekiel used the image of a shepherd first to castigate the leaders of Israel for their failure to care for the people, then spoke of God as taking up the shepherding of his people. And one of the most beloved of all psalms begins with the words: “The Lord is my shepherd...”

God still needs shepherds, good pastors (in Latin meaning “shepherd”) to care for God’s people, and especially to care for the least: the poor, the weak, the defenseless. Shepherds in our parish include all of you. Shepherds are needed to minister to God’s people, to serve their needs. Dedicated parishioners are needed to help lead this community of faith more deeply into the mystery of Jesus Christ, to help the community recognize that “the grace of God has truly appeared, saving all.” Prophetic voices are in demand to continue the work of “training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age.” We need the voice of shepherds who know their sheep, who call them by name, who lead them to green pastures and guide them along the right path. So the first need for shepherds has to do with the care of God’s people, a project no longer limited to the priest, as in the past.

God also continues to need angels – those who proclaim this Good News to people needing to hear it, and those who celebrate the Good News in a liturgy of praise. Sometimes it is a lone voice that proclaims the Good News about Jesus. It can take great courage and commitment to do this. At other times, it is the work of the community to sing God’s praises in a way that will draw others into it. Both messenger angels and a multitude of the heavenly host were needed that first Christmas – and still are. These can be discouraging times – a lot of sadness in our world this Christmas. There are people who are losing their jobs, people who find it hard to get a decent job, more people than ever living below the poverty line in our country and in our parish, and growing numbers throughout our city who do not have basic needs met. We need angels who will speak this message of hope again and again. We need angels who remind us that God loves this world and all who are in it. And that God’s will is for “peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

The Christmas story is meant to challenge and change us, not just make us feel good. It does more than direct our attention to the lovely manger scene that we set under the Christmas tree. The Christmas story contains a call to action and a challenge to change. The Christmas message is a story that can change the world if we let it in. It is about the God who continues to make new our world, who continues to love the world into new life. That infant born and laid in an animal feeder continues to nourish the world with his Body and Blood.

So I humbly suggest today: Wanted: Shepherds and Angels. Wanted: men and women who allow their lives to be interrupted by this child, who hear the news of his birth, and take the time to go and be with him. Wanted: proclaimers of the Good News that a Savior has come and continues to come. Wanted: people willing to join in that first birthday song of celebration: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests."

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