

CHRISTMAS 2010

O HOLY NIGHT

Our family always looked forward to decorating our Christmas tree, even though this experience had its challenges. My earliest memories are that we bought a tree from a lot and this could be iffy because who knew how long ago it had been cut and it was pretty hard to find a well-shaped one. Later on we began to travel all the way to the Marietta area, where my parents were from and where I and one of my sisters were born, to a tree farm where we purchased a live tree. This was a better experience, but the tree often still needed some work of trimming so that the shape was as near perfect as possible.

Speaking of perfection, we tried to make our tree as pretty as could be and my mother saw to it that we were careful to do it well. She insisted that we put the icicles on one at a time instead of throwing bunches of them at the tree – which is what we kids were tempted to do and sometimes did do when her back was turned. Of course, Mom was right – the icicles made the tree beautiful. We had a strange assortment of ornaments and they told the history of our family because they were from different decades and held different meanings. We even had some from World War II days when my parents were first married. These were very simple – clear glass with colored bands painted on them. During the war, metal was rationed, so these ornaments used cardboard hooks and you could still see the cardboard remnants that had fallen inside the bulbs. I saved some of these ornaments when our Mom died

When we were finished with our decorating, we developed the custom every year of saying “this is our prettiest tree ever.” We laughed about that, but we really believed it too. And why not? Christmas is a time when, like other folks, our family felt a little closer together and a little more kind. Our petty squabbles retreated into the background. Our tree was a symbol of our good intentions and our hopes. We children may have even tried to heed our parents’ advice that we shouldn’t expect everything we wanted for Christmas; and we may have even taken to heart what the sisters in our school reminded us; that some children had no presents at all. We did not use this language then, but I would say that Christmas made the Klinger family a little holier. One of the nuns once told us that on Christmas and Easter, grace is more available to us humans and this idea has stuck with me. I am not sure how good that theology is because God is always there for us. But what the sister was trying to say is that this night is not called “holy” for nothing. Where would humankind be without this night? The Romance of Christmas is just that – a true story about God’s passionate love for us human beings.

So solemn and enchanting is this feast of Christmas that ancient people believed cattle in stables fall to their knees at midnight, birds sing all night long, and trees and plants, especially those along the Jordan River, bow in reverence toward Bethlehem. It was once believed that at midnight the gates of paradise are opened and anyone who died at that hour would enter heaven at once. (This would prove sister right, wouldn’t it?) And animals are thought to be able to talk like humans at midnight--in Latin, no less, and even if they didn’t go to St. Charles!

Legends like this one abound:

On the first Christmas night the animals were given the power of speech. Thus they could praise God and tell everyone about the birth of Jesus. The first animal to speak was the cock, which flapped his wings and chanted, “Christ is born.”

And the crow heard the cock, and wanted to know what time it took place. So he cawed, "When, when?" In the forest, the mighty lion heard the news of Christ's birth, and roared with all his might, "Today Christ is born." The cow wanted to know where the Christ Child was born, so she lowed, "Where, where?"

The sheep heard the angels telling the shepherds the good news of great joy and bleated the answer, "He is born in Bethlehem." The donkey wanted all to visit the stable at Bethlehem and see the Holy Child, so he brayed, "Let us go to Bethlehem." A little lark flew high in the air, as if to lead the way, and trilled, "To adore him." The dogs barked, "We should go to Bethlehem," and the horse whinnied, "Wheeeee...he is born in Bethlehem." All the animals offered their services to the Holy Infant and the Blessed Mother Mary; and the lowliest of all God's creatures, the worm, was the first to do so.

As the story goes, it was so dark in the stable that Mary could not see to put on the tiny garments of the Baby Jesus. A little worm, seeing how hard it was for her, crept along the floor to a slit in the door through which the moonlight was shining. He took a ray of light and carried it along until he reached the Blessed Mother. Then he climbed up her cloak and settled on her knee so that she could see by the light.

The little Savior was so pleased, he said to the worm, "Dear little worm, your kindness to my mother shall be rewarded. I make you a present of the light. You shall never lose it." Then the little worm was placed on the edge of the manger bed where it took the place of a nightlight. And ever since then, this creature has been known as the "glowworm."

In Act 1, Scene 1 of Hamlet, Shakespeare echoed some of these same beliefs:

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes,
Wherein our Savior's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, no witch has power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.

And if legend and Shakespeare both agree, who would dare say it isn't true? If God can create everything out of nothing and if the Spirit can make a virgin to be with child and if this Son of God can re-create us, why could not this God make nature get with the program on this Holy Night?

And, of course, this night leads surely and inexorably to the other night of grace that the nun mentioned – Easter. There is an old saying: "The wood of the crib is the wood of the cross." Jesus came to die out of pure love for us. He came to get into bed with us and to share human life with us. His birth sets the tone for his life because he was born into lowly poverty. Christmas was not pretty like modern commercialism has made it. Christmas literally stunk because there was no air freshener available in the stable. Yes, Jesus shared everything with us (except sin) and he had it harder than most of us can ever imagine. And he humbled himself to make possible our forgiveness and our everlasting life with God. So why shouldn't all of nature and the animal and plant kingdoms celebrate this holy night?

So let us all be happy about Christmas. And if we should see some cows kneeling down tonight or some trees and plants bowing toward Bethlehem, let us think nothing of it. For this is the night when every Christmas tree is perfect in its trimmings and every family wants to be united and every human person wants to be closer to God (even if they are not conscious of it). This is the night when it is our birthright to be happy unless some sorrow prevents it. On this holy night, Jesus is especially close to the sad and the mourning, to the poor and the homeless, to the troubled and the lost and, above all, to the sick and the sinner – even if they can't feel it or believe it. This is the night when devout Christians want to be the humble Christ Child to those who need him most. This is the night when our salvation buds forth (as Isaiah says) and the earth opens up to give us the savior. For, the nun from my grade school days of so long ago was (of course) right. This holy night, so full of God, changed the universe. By God's grace, may it change us for good!