

MAKING ROOM FOR THE LORD

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All Christians are deeply moved by the story of the Lord's birth on earth. It is told in so few words, and yet what words have had a greater impact on history than these? The story is timeless; even now it plays upon our hearts, and we are moved beyond the normal power of the written word. Something within us listens carefully, marks every word, and silently our hearts assent to the inner truth. We are reminded of many childhood images and affections: tableaux and pageants, candle-light services, family celebrations, decorated trees, gifts, cards, warm fires, bells and choirs vibrating with sounds of Christmas, and—most of all—warm feelings inside. And yet something haunts us about the story of the Lord's birth. For there was no room for Jesus to be born within the comfort of the inn.

The joy and warmth of Christmas is mingled with a poignant sadness; the infant Lord was born in a cold stable, not in the warmth of the inn. He was laid on the rough straw of a manger, not in a cozy bed. We wish that all tiny babies may be protected, may be warm, may be given every consideration by adults. Yet here was a tiny baby, crowded out by unthinking adults, left to be born in a cold stable—a tiny baby whose very soul was the loving Creator of the universe. Our hearts strain at the thought; this should not have happened.

We can vividly imagine the scene from the few words that are given. Many travelers are pushing into the little highland town of Bethlehem. It is almost dark and all are pressing ahead, anxious to find shelter for the night. Joseph and Mary of Nazareth come wearily to the end of their long journey, but no room is left for them in the inn. Others have arrived ahead of them, and the innkeeper is harried from taking care of his many guests. There is no particular ill will against this couple, neither is there any particular effort to accommodate them. There is nothing for them to do but seek shelter in a nearby stable where Mary may rest and give birth to her child.

Perhaps we feel indignant at the cold-hearted stupidity of those who crowded the infant Lord from the inn, who were more interested in their own comfort than in providing for a mother in labor. But there is more to this story than that. The idea that the Lord was crowded out of an inn as a tiny child claws at our hearts not because of what others did long ago, but because of what we continue to do today. The infant Lord was casually crowded out of the inn long ago, and just so now, through the drift of circumstance and with no particular ill will, we may crowd the Lord out of our own hearts.

How much are we willing to sacrifice our comfort and material satisfaction to receive the Lord? Has our inn been filled with so many other guests that there is no longer room for God? While not meaning to be irreligious, have we so occupied our thoughts and feelings with other matters that religion can no longer find a place within us? Is it possible that we too are like an inn, overcrowded with paying guests, where the first-come are first-served, with no thought of priorities? Has this noisy demanding world, full of pleasures and competition, taken hold of our time and attention to such an extent that we can no longer make room for a tiny baby who is God?

The spiritual meaning of the Christmas story confronts us with the reality of what heavenly life is, as opposed to what we might expect it to be. It comes as a tiny child, unassuming, undemanding, without glory or honor, with no glittering rewards for our hospitality. We may be accustomed to thinking of heavenly life in terms of such external things as high and distinguished uses or paradisaical living. But these are not the essential things that the Lord has to offer; rather He offers us peace, tranquility, and happiness, like that of a little child.

What is the internal significance of this tiny baby who is God? Whatever it is, this quality must be at the very center of heavenly life, inmosty and universally the Lord's quality.

The infant Jesus represents the quality of innocence, the unassuming, unpretentious, unsophisticated, uncalculating willingness to be led. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us that the Lord is innocence itself, that innocence is the human itself (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4797:2), and that innocence is the very essential of regeneration or spiritual rebirth (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3994:6).

As we read the Christmas story and put together the two ideas of God presented in the Word—the magnificent, lovingly-wise Creator of the universe and the tiny child born of Mary—we feel the power of the Divine innocence. It is an apparently small, quiet thing, and yet it is the very essence of humanity. If we wish to find happiness and heaven in great things—in doing wonderful deeds, conquering great injustices, righting the world—but fail to achieve a state of innocence in the process, we will have missed the whole point of earthly life.

Heaven is not an achievement, not a state of doing, but a state of being. So often we feel that we are failures if we have not accomplished great things in our life, or if we have not been able to provide our families with abundant material wealth, but what we accomplish is relatively unimportant. Everything we do will soon turn to dust and be forgotten. But what we are, what we have become, that is vitally important. For what we are affects others more than what we do, and whatever we are when we die will continue to be to eternity.

Our self-love, if not put in proper order, is so easily convinced of its own ideas and importance. False habits and worldly patterns of life crowd out looking to the Lord for guidance. We like to think that we know so much, we have so much knowledge from the world. And much of what we have learned does not seem to fit with what is taught in the Word. We feel that we must understand everything intellectually before we will fully commit ourselves to the sacrifices of religious life. In short, we wish to lead ourselves—and our innocence is lost.

Yet we know nothing, and no matter how much we learn, we will continue to know nothing when measured against how much there is to know. The Lord tells us that in order to enter the kingdom of God we must become again as a little child. But there is a major difference between the little child we are at birth, and the little child we are to become. The newly-born child knows nothing, but is unaware of his ignorance. The reborn child knows nothing and has learned that he knows nothing. Knowing that we do not know is central to the innocence of wisdom. For in this state of humility we are totally open to the Lord's guidance.

This Christmas season each of us will have many guests in our inn. We will be concerned about many things. The crowds will all be jostling for a place in our thought and intention. Will we find room for the tiny baby, and worship the Lord from a willingness to be led by Him? Will we follow the Lord in the year to come, or will we go our own way?