

## **“Baby, it’s cold outside!”**

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,  
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;  
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,  
in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Do you recognize these words? They’re from a poem composed by Christina Rossetti in 1872. A more important question: can you relate to the picture that these words paint? You most certainly can if you are a Northerner like me. The “snow on snow” is very familiar to this native of Syracuse – that city in upstate New York which is proud to be the snow capital of the USA. The “earth ... hard as iron, water like a stone” is certainly an accurate portrayal of the Chicago which I now call home – especially during the recent cold snap which dropped temperatures down below zero and caused the faint of heart to run for shelter. But for some of us, we just can’t get into the “Christmas spirit” (whatever that is!) unless the weather matches what we hear about in “Jingle Bells” or “Let it Snow” or “Sleigh Ride”. Needless to say, Madison Avenue and the retailers probably like it that way too!

The thought does occur to me, however: there are places where it seldom if ever snows – places like San Diego or Phoenix or Houston or Honolulu. How can our parishioners there have Christmas without cold and snow? The Northern mind boggles! Yet somehow they do manage to celebrate, and to do it with gusto. It’s just that I have formed a picture of what Christmas ought to be like, and everything that doesn’t fit in my “box” is seen as unthinkable, even if it really exists and is perfectly normal for someone else.

I don’t think I’m alone. Don’t we all tend to make everything conform to what is familiar to us? A case in point: way back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Saint Francis of Assisi came up with the idea of recreating Christ’s birth in Bethlehem – complete with smelly and unruly animals. Thus began a tradition which quickly became popular in the Western Church – namely, the Nativity Scene. However, instead of dressing up the characters in “period” costumes reflecting the reality of Jesus’ time, people started populating the Nativity Scene with people they were familiar with in their own lives. Shepherds, dressed like their contemporary counterparts, were joined by local peasants and artisans and merchants and nobility around the manger. The Nativity Scene ceased to be a depiction of Bethlehem, becoming rather a snapshot of the local village as it appeared at any given time.

So what was the first Christmas really like? Who knows? In a certain sense, who cares? Astronomers who have looked into the possible times for the appearance of the Christmas star think that the actual date may very well not have been December 25<sup>th</sup> – or January 7<sup>th</sup> either, for that matter – but rather some time in April. So what? Scripture doesn’t specify, does it? Of course not! A pope way back when set the date of Christmas to supplant a former pagan holiday, and we have gotten used to what our ancestors in Europe passed down as “normal” – including snow and cold and fir trees.

Aren’t we doing to do to Christmas itself what was done with respect to the Nativity Scene – namely trying to make Christmas itself conform to our ideas rather than

letting ourselves be shaped by the reality of God-with-us? Christina Rossetti tells us how foolish this is:

Our God, heaven cannot hold Him nor earth sustain;  
heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign.

None of our social or cultural constructs can hold Him either: His greatness is beyond our wildest imaginings, His power unsurpassed. Yet He sets aside His power and grandeur, choosing the way of humility.

...a stable place sufficed,  
The Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ.  
Enough for Him, Whom cherubim and seraphim worship night and day,  
A breastful of milk and a mangerful of hay,  
Enough for Him Whom angels fall before,  
The ox and ass and camel Which adore.

Such humility is so easy to appreciate in others, so hard to practice ourselves!

We gather in church before the altar. We witness the same Divine Presence as those at Bethlehem. We, like the *santons* around the *crèche*, come as we are – except that our dress and occupations and preoccupations are of the 21<sup>st</sup> century variety. May we let ourselves be transformed by our encounter with the King of Love Who had no place to sleep except a feed trough. May the needy and the homeless find His love in us, for the love we show to those who are “out in the cold” is the gift Christ which desires from us.

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