

Christmas: The Birth of Jesus

She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

In his novel, *The House of the Dead*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky describes Christmas day in a Siberian prison camp:

It was a dingy little settlement among frozen wastelands. From the grim prison at one end of a single muddy street the convicts peered through barred windows at the small cathedral on a hill at the other side of town. The bells rang merrily as that Christmas dawn arrived and villagers trooped in happy procession to the early church service. It was Christ's mass, Christmas. "But not for us who are cut off from all humanity," the ragged prisoners wept, huddled together for comfort from the cold.

Finally, however, when the long cathedral service was ended, a priest came to the prison, set up a crude altar, and began the service of worship.

"Now God has come to us!" the convicts shouted in surprised joy.

"Oh, yes," replied the priest. "This is where he lives all year long. You see, he goes to the cathedral only on special occasions."

What a great insight! The reality is that God does live among us every day of every year. So often, however, we fail to recognize it and even think that we are beyond God's care, concern and love. All too often we conveniently park God in churches and tabernacles, and forget that God is also in the people and the human interactions of every day. Somehow, we act as though God is removed from our mundane existence. Consequently, we fail to experience God's tender love and compassion.

Christmas is the tangible demonstration of God's desire to be close to us. By choosing to come among us as a helpless, dependent and vulnerable child, God clearly signalled that power and control were not part of the divine agenda. Simply being one among us and in solidarity with us was God's real agenda, and to underline that message God chose as his first audience the dregs of society - shepherds who had no credibility and held their own with the best of scoundrels and thieves.

That same God is born again and again in all those people who have caught the meaning of the incarnation - God among us -and who, in turn, reflect the good news that God articulated in the life and ministry of Jesus. That message of love and compassion is to be seen and heard all around us as ordinary, decent human beings pick up the song that Jesus sang and sing it with their own harmonies.

A striking example of this is commemorated in a rather insignificant statue in the town square of a city in Eastern Europe. The statue is a tribute to human care and compassion generously and sensitively expressed in the midst of bitter inter-racial strife. One day during the war in Sarajevo, twenty-two people were standing in line outside a bakery, hoping that bread would be available at some time during the day. An artillery shell suddenly exploded near the bakery and all twenty-two people in the

queue were added to the list of victims of the terrible civil war that was raging. A man named Vedran Smialiavic who had been a member of the Sarajevo Symphony Orchestra felt he just had to do something to commemorate those twenty-two innocent victims, lest they became mere statistics. What he did was quite extraordinary: he donned the suit and bow tie he wore for orchestral performances, took his cello and chair and set himself up in the ruins of the bakery. There, amid the fallen masonry, he sat for twenty-two days and played one of his favourite pieces, Albinoni's *Adagio in G*. He ignored the artillery shells and the snipers' bullets and went on playing his cello. To mark Smialiavic's courage and heroism, the people of Sarajevo erected a statue of him playing the violin in the rubble. That man gave people hope.

The Christ Child born in a stable ushered in hope for a world in despair. As his followers, our role is to bring the music of hope to wherever we find human brokenness and rubble.