

Hold gently to the peace of the Christ Child



The road from Nazareth to Bethlehem was never going to be easy for Mary and Joseph even with a reliable source of transport that the donkey proved to be – slow but sure. The journey was done under sufferance, a directive by government to partake in a national census. For a young Palestinian woman, heavily pregnant, the timing was hardly appropriate. Anxieties about where they would stay on arrival travelled with them. No Air B & B to book.

The journey from Bethlehem was to prove not just hard but dangerous. The story of Herod's persecution of baby boys, graphically illustrated by the 16th-century Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel in his famous Massacre of the Innocents, fills even the modern mind with terror. The flight into Egypt to seek sanctuary is a detail omitted from Christmas cards and Christmas tree decorations. Even in churches the 28th of December, which commemorates this bit of the story, is often quietly ignored. Yet the gospel text is clear, after the joyous arrival of a first born the happy couple did not return home. To go home simply was not safe. Like all good parents Mary and Joseph put their baby first; the price of becoming refugees was a secondary concern.

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem and from Bethlehem, in the West Bank, through Gaza into Egypt is a story that has been replayed over the centuries and none more so than at the present time. For many living in the Holy Land, this will be a Christmas filled with the same anxieties experienced by Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, and even the donkey. Where is security and resulting peace to be found for both Israeli and Palestinian? For Ukrainian and Russian? In which inn will a human family seemingly unable to reconcile differences, unable to live in a constructive and creative harmony, find a room?

The world remains unsafe for many children, women and men and for those living in such unsafe environments there will be little peace to celebrate this Christmastide. For those of us blessed to have warm beds and loving relationships to hold onto our Christmas gift of prayer must be one of empathy and charity. Peace and goodwill are blessings not to be taken for granted.

Hold gently to the peace of the Christ Child this Christmas. And may that gentle holding fill you with hope and faith as you share of yourself with others.

Happy Christmas.

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