

“The Work of Christmas”

Today is the last day of Christmas. Despite what the secular world thinks, Christmas does not end on Christmas Day. Christmas Day is only the beginning. I know a young girl who told me she corrected her mother who thought that the twelve days of Christmas were the days leading up to Christmas Day. The girl was proud of herself for knowing that the twelve days start on Christmas Day. I think she is a liturgy nerd in the making.

While today is the last day of Christmas that is not its proper name. Today is called Twelfth Night. Like Christmas Eve, which is an all-day event, Twelfth Night is the day that marks the end of the Christmas season and the day leading to the Epiphany. Epiphany is the day when we remember the Magi visited the toddler Jesus.

When we conflate Epiphany with Christmas Eve putting the Wise Men in the manger with the Shepherds we lose an important aspect of Matthew’s Christmas narrative. There are no shepherds feeding their flocks by night in Matthew’s rendition. Shepherds only show up in the Gospel of Luke. Likewise, there are no Magi in Luke’s narrative. Each gospel writer is telling his own version of the nativity and emphasizing particular aspects to give us insights into what they feel is important about Jesus’ ministry. Luke wants us to emphasize Jesus as the one who came to lift up the lowly and minister to common folk and the poor. He reflects that in the shepherds. Mathew wants to emphasize Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords. Thus, he has Magi come to him with regal gifts, because he is the King of the Jews.

Second, the Holy Family lived in Bethlehem according to Matthew. They did not make the long journey that we are familiar with from Luke’s telling. The Lucan version is the one that has captured our imagination for centuries. We have taken the rather terse Matthew version of the birth and attached it to Luke’s. Thus, shepherds and Magi in the stable.

Matthew becomes an exciting narrative when the Magi show up. They first come to Jerusalem asking if anyone knows where the Christ child is. Because they are calling him the King of the Jews they capture the attention of King Herod. He is the official king of the Jews, and he does not like hearing that there is another one around. He is threatened. He tells the Magi that he will come worship this new king if the Magi will tell him where he is to be found. Actually, Herod is scared. He is afraid that this child might be a challenge to his authority. He is so afraid that he sends soldiers to Bethlehem with orders to kill all boys two-years-old and younger.¹

Unlike Herod, we feel that the Christ child is a gift from God. The gift is what we have been celebrating these past eleven days with carols, crèches, trees, feasts and lights. When we receive a gift, the normal response is to give thanks for it. Some gifts are practical, so we put them to use. Some gifts are fun, so we play with them. Some gifts are intellectual, so we set out to master them. Some gifts are beautiful, so we admire them. Some gifts are personal, so we relish them.

¹ December 28th marks the Feast of the Holy Innocents

Whatever the gift, it is not fully realized until it is accepted and used. If we receive a gift and store it away, we have never really accepted it, even if we sent a thank you note. If we receive a gift and re-gift it, we have not accepted it we have just passed it on. With the gift of the birth of the Son of God we are called not only to accept the gift, but to have that gift make a difference in our life and in the lives of others.

That is the challenge of Christmas. Christmas can be fun, but included in the joy of the celebration is an ongoing task to accept the gift of Jesus and use it. If we really believe that God sent his only begotten Son into the world to save the world, we have a responsibility to take part in that salvation. Not just for ourselves or our closest friends and relatives, although that is not a bad place to start, but to share that salvation with everyone we meet.

Howard Thurman was one of the most important and influential theologians, scholars, teachers, and preachers of the mid-20th century. He was a leader in the American Civil Rights movement and mentor to many of its leaders including James Farmer, Episcopal priest the Rev. Pauli Murray, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He served as chaplain at Howard University and the first black chaplain at Boston University. His book *Jesus and the Disinherited* is one of those mind changing books and I recommend to everyone. He also wrote poetry.

In his poem, “The Work of Christmas” Thurman tells us that there is more to Christmas than the twelve-day celebration of the birth of Christ. Once everyone has gone home and the celebrations are over, we have work to do. We are to take the joy, wonder and promise of Christmastide deeply into our hearts and out into the world. As we come to the end of the Christmas season it is time for us to put to work what we have been given in the gift of the newborn Christ.

Thurman wrote:

“When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.”²

² “The Work of Christmas” by Howard Thurman