

# Living in the Shadow of the Manger

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How might our theological vision be enriched by reflecting as much on the fragility of the newborn Infant as the vulnerability of the Crucified One? When the shadow of the Manger falls across our lives with a power similar to the shadow of the Cross, we will commit ourselves to respond to the particular needs and suffering of children.

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**F**or centuries Christian moral imagination has been informed by experiences and interpretations of living in the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ. It is the most influential paradigm for Christian living. It informs our ways of making meaning of our lives, our world, and our faith in both ordinary and extraordinary times.

How might our theological vision be enriched if we were to give as much consideration to reflection on the fragility of the newborn Infant as the vulnerability of the Crucified One? How do the life-threatening circumstances that lead the Infant into exile compare with the life-threatening circumstances that lead to the arrest, trial, and death of the Crucified One? How might such reflection enlarge our sense of social responsibility? What if we were to allow the shadow of the Manger to fall across our lives with a power and intensity similar to the shadow of the Cross? Might seeing the realities of our world from the perspective of Bethlehem compel us to consciously commit ourselves to responding to the particular needs and suffering of children? Using these questions as a starting point, I would like to expand the theological horizons from which we as adults take inspiration and sustenance for our lives as followers of Jesus and advocates for the children entrusted to our care.

I find myself coming to an unsettling awareness about the resolve of adult Christians to recognize and serve the needs of children (a category in which I include youngsters, infants, and the unborn) entrusted to our care. We seem to be lacking the desire, the will, or the ability to retrieve and to hand on the theological resources of our tradition that would guide us toward faithful action on behalf of our young sisters and brothers. Precisely at a time in human history when the realities of abortion, hunger, poverty, neglect, homelessness, loss of identity, abuse, corruption, and war are more often a rule of life than an exception, the state of the world's children calls into question the degree to which Christian communities are being all that they can be *with and for* children.

The more I ponder this, the more I am convinced that one of the key reasons for our troubling limitations and inadequacies may be traced to our reliance on the mystery of the cross for identifying, diagnosing, triaging, treating, and explaining the sources and symptoms of all human suffering and sin. My intention is not to diminish the centrality of the passion, crucifixion, and death of Jesus in the life of every Christian. Nevertheless, in terms of witness and proclamation, I do believe that the times in which we live demand of us a more differentiated understanding of the suffering of Christ as well as that of humanity. In addition to focusing on the mystery of the Crucifixion, on living in the shadow of the cross, we should testify in these times to the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Resurrection as well. Certainly we must embody in our daily life and practice the belief that our *Savior* Jesus Christ suffers for us and for our sins. But we must also give expression to the belief that he is *Emmanuel*, God-with-Us, the One who came among us as child, and that this same Jesus Christ is truly our *Risen Lord*, who has broken the chains of death and set us free.<sup>1</sup>

For far too long, our moral imaginations have been limited because we have overlooked, forgotten, or hidden the theological foundations and ethical imperatives associated with "living in the shadow of the manger."

#### **THE PASSION OF THE INFANT CHRIST**

In the aftermath of World War II, the English author Caryll Houselander published a thought-provoking book entitled *The Passion of the Infant Christ*. "Bethlehem," she wrote, "is the inscape of Calvary.... The Passion of the Man Christ on Calvary is at once revealed and hidden in the Infant Christ in Bethlehem."<sup>2</sup> By exploring some fascinating parallels between the Manger and the Cross, the Christ Child and the Christ Man, and Bethlehem and Calvary, she disclosed the significance of the suffering of the Infant as well as the Crucified One. In doing so, Houselander also focused adult attention to the particular needs and sufferings of children.

During the Cold War era the United Nations became conscious of the wide-spread suffering of children throughout the world and concluded that the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, advanced in 1949 to promote

human dignity, well-being, and rights in general, had largely failed to recognize and enforce the special rights to which every child is entitled. In 1959 the United Nations drafted the *Declaration on the Rights of the Child*, setting forth ten principles in defense of every child's need for special safeguards, including appropriate legal protection, before and after birth.<sup>3</sup>

Houselander's considerations of the Manger challenged me to reflect seriously upon the particular suffering of the Christ Child in ways that I

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**To respond appropriately to the needs of children, we must prayerfully reflect on the suffering of the Christ Child with the same seriousness as that of the Christ Man.**

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had never done before. In a similar fashion, my initial discovery of the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of the Child* required me to reflect seriously on the distinctiveness of the needs and rights of children. Thanks to these two important points of refer-

ence, the direction of my theological inquiry took an unexpected turn. I found myself wrestling with this haunting question: *Can a Christian community whose theological horizon is primarily informed by a theology of the cross respond adequately and appropriately to the particular needs and claims of children?*

The more I ponder the question, the more it becomes clear to me that it cannot be answered "Yes." To respond in the negative, however, requires me to answer this deeper question: how might we supply for what is lacking? In other words, how might we engage in the kind of theological reflection that would benefit the children of our world? I recommend the following three strategies: (1) to prayerfully reflect upon the suffering undergone by the Christ Child with the same seriousness as that of the Christ Man, (2) to discover ways of allowing our prayerful reflection to stir our Christian consciences, and (3) to read the Word in the world as it is revealed in and through the lives of children who suffer.

To provide a framework for prayerful reflection for use by Christians both individually and in communities, I have adapted and synthesized a number of Houselander's parallels<sup>4</sup> and set them to correspond with the principles of the *Declaration on the Rights of the Child* in the form of guided meditations. Admittedly, the framework has its limitations. Nevertheless, as a means for inspiring prayer, guiding reflection, stimulating discussion, and raising further questions, I believe the framework accomplishes its objective of inviting and leading adult Christians to consider the theological and ethical implications of living in the shadow of the Manger.

#### **A FRAMEWORK FOR PRAYERFUL REFLECTION**

In each meditation, prayerfully reflect from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and on the condition of children today.

Ask God for discernment of our responsibilities as adult Christians to care for children in our congregations, our immediate communities, and in the larger world.



#### **MEDITATION ON LIFE**

*From the perspective of the Cross:* Consider Christ, his life threatened by those who want him dead, approaching the hour of his passion, riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey.

*From the perspective of the Manger:* Consider the unborn Infant, in Mary's pregnant womb, approaching the hour of his birth, as they are carried into Bethlehem on the back of a donkey.

*On the condition of children today:* Consider the unborn and at-risk children of our world. Consider how every child is entitled to life. Consider the Christian commitment to defend life.

#### **MEDITATION ON AFFECTION AND SECURITY**

*Cross:* Consider Christ on Calvary, sleeping his last sleep in his mother's arms.

*Manger:* Consider the newborn Infant in Bethlehem, sleeping his first sleep in his mother's arms.

*Children:* Consider children, alive or lifeless, who will be held in the arms of their mothers this day. Consider how every child is entitled to an atmosphere of affection and security. Consider the Christian commitment to care for mothers and children.

#### **MEDITATION ON NAME**

*Cross:* Consider the identification of Christ as "King of the Jews" and the ways in which this naming shaped the course of his life and ultimately cost him his life.

*Manger:* Consider the Infant who, from the time of his conception is called Jesus, who from the time of his birth is identified as the infant king of the Jews, a naming that not only threatens his life, but endangers the lives of other children as well.

*Children:* Consider the importance of ensuring that a child has a name, an identity, a birth certificate, a passport, a sense of belonging. Consider how every child is entitled to a name and nationality. Consider the Christian commitment to children whose lack of registration or documentation denies them a family identity, legal rights, or immigration status.

#### **MEDITATION ON PERSONAL SAFETY**

*Cross:* Consider Christ on Calvary, betrayed and abandoned by his followers, stripped of his garments and all that he owned, and made

poor by the forces of evil, oppression, and domination.

*Manger:* Consider the Infant in Bethlehem, soon to become a refugee in Egypt, displaced as he is deprived of the cradle prepared for him in Nazareth, and made poor by the historical circumstances of politics and culture.

*Children:* Consider children who are abandoned or abused, forced into exile as refugees, unprotected as orphans. Consider how every child is entitled to personal safety and social security. Consider the Christian commitment to at-risk children locally and globally.

#### **MEDITATION ON CARE FOR SPECIAL NEEDS**

*Cross:* Consider Christ on Calvary, laid upon a wooden cross, set between two thieves, and stretched, straightened, and fastened down.

*Manger:* Consider the Infant in Bethlehem, laid in a wooden manger, set in the midst of animals, and stretched out, straightened, and fastened in swaddling clothes.

*Children:* Consider children with disabilities, life-threatening illnesses, and chronic conditions. Consider how every child is entitled to special care for special needs. Consider the Christian commitment to children with special needs and their families.

#### **MEDITATION ON PROVISION OF HUMAN SERVICES**

*Cross:* Consider how Christ was crucified outside the city wall, as Mary, his mother, powerless and helpless, stood by the cross of her son.

*Manger:* Consider how the Infant was born outside of his own village and crowded out of the inns of Bethlehem, was born in a stable as Mary and Joseph knelt by the manger where he was laid.

*Children:* Consider children who are denied access to human services and who experience exclusion from safe housing, day care, schools, hospitals, and playgrounds. Consider how every child is entitled to the special protection of the child's best interests. Consider the Christian commitment to children on the margins of society as well as their desperate parents.

#### **MEDITATION ON EDUCATION AND RECREATION**

*Cross:* Consider how Christ, shortly after his arrest, was questioned by the chief priests and Sanhedrin about his disciples and his teaching.

*Manger:* Consider how the Child was presented in the Temple in Jerusalem, and as an older boy was found sitting in the Temple among the teachers.

*Children:* Consider children who do not have access to educational opportunities and activities that will enrich their lives. Consider how every child is entitled to an education and recreation. Consider the Christian commitment to ensure the well-being of children through education and play.

**MEDITATION ON RECOGNITION AND ASSISTANCE**

*Cross:* Consider how Christ on Calvary was tortured and held as a helpless captive, while observed by witnesses, hostile bystanders, and Roman soldiers.

*Manger:* Consider how the Infant in Bethlehem, a fragile and dependent newborn, was visited by peasant shepherds and sought out by foreign royalty.

*Children:* Consider the significance for children of outside recognition and assistance from adults other than their parents and relatives. Consider how every child is entitled to be raised in an atmosphere of peace, dignity, and freedom. Consider the Christian commitment to solidarity with and care for children and their families.

**MEDITATION ON PROTECTION FROM CRUELTY**

*Cross:* Consider how Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate and how his followers survived to tell the story.

*Manger:* Consider how the Infant's life was threatened by Herod and how, while surviving in exile, the lives of numerous innocent children were destroyed in his place.

*Children:* Consider the indignities, injustices, and martyrdoms that children suffer at the hands of adults who often carry out their cruelty with impunity. Consider how every child is entitled to protection from cruelty. Consider the Christian commitment to prevent and protect children from all forms of cruelty and endangerment.

**MEDITATION ON PRIORITY OF CHILDREN**

*Cross:* Consider the spikenard and ointment that were poured out for Christ in Bethany in anticipation of his death.

*Manger:* Consider the gold, myrrh, and frankincense that were poured out for the Infant by the Magi who journeyed to visit him at Bethlehem.

*Children:* Consider the needs of children for comfort, compassion, and concern as they anticipate and face difficulties in their young lives. Consider how every child is entitled to be among the first to receive protection and relief. Consider the Christian commitment to make the well-being of children the highest priority of the congregation.

**STIRRING THE CONSCIENCES OF ADULT CHRISTIANS**

Beyond prayerful reflection, what are the consequences of this framework of analysis for congregations concerned about the spiritual and social welfare of children?

The framework requires us to be attentive to the mystery of the Incarnation in all of its dimensions. Not only should we wonder, "Why did God

become human?" for embedded in that question are related questions: "Why did God come as infant?" and "Of what real significance are the infancy narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke?"

Ethically speaking, the framework requires us to beware of the limitations of our adult-centric worldviews and the inadequacies of our trickle-down social theories that discount, minimize, or disregard the fact that

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children are more than miniature adults, potential adults, or extensions of adults. In their "thisness" children are not only who they may become in the future, but who they are in the present just as God has created them to be—persons in time. Their needs and experiences parallel those of adults; however, there is a qualitative difference. Though suffering is a part of every human existence, no one can bear to

see an infant or child suffer, not even the infant or child of an enemy. To think differently is to slip down toward one's own dehumanization.

The framework also challenges Christian congregations to reassess their suspicions about the ideological motivations and political agendas associated with the United Nations. Surely some gospel value is witnessed by our upholding the aspects of *Rights of the Child* that can be supported and strengthened by Christian churches and church-based non-governmental organizations. When it comes to taking seriously the *Rights of the Child*, throwing the metaphorical baby out with the bath water is not an acceptable strategy for Christians whose vested interest in following Jesus requires pursuing all that is truly in the best interests of children. In the religiously pluralistic, post-modern world in which children all too easily become pawns in the power plays of adult decision makers (political, economic, cultural, and religious), the cost of Christian stewardship requires us to take a long hard look at the many scandals that exacerbate the suffering of the children entrusted by God to our care (Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:1-2).

#### **READING THE WORD IN THE WORLD**

The Second Person of the Trinity, who could have chosen to beam aboard planet Earth, either adopting, materializing, or simply appearing to have the human body of a thirty-something adult, chose instead the way of

incarnation as a child. That is the major theological insight of a theology of the Manger. In becoming human, God chose to be conceived by and born of a woman. God chose to enter into creation, taking on not only our humanity, but the fragility and dependency of the human condition as the Living Christ yet unborn, as the Infant Christ in need of affection and protection, and as the Christ Child impressionable and growing up in a dangerous world. God's choice to share in the passion of human infancy was a choice to undergo the sufferings that are a part of being human. Moreover, the choice involved God entrusting God's self to the care, concern, and solicitude of human persons—inviting Mary, compelling Joseph, fascinating shepherds, amazing Magi, comforting Anna and Simeon, and unsettling Herod.

The Infant did not make disciples. Rather, the Infant called forth from human persons the goodness in and for which they were created. The Infant reminded those who surrounded him that they had been called to participate in God's mission by being mindful and attentive to the dependency of His human condition. The Infant trusted that men, women, and children would respond freely to the invitation to be his stewards and his ministers. The condition to which they responded was not extraordinary, but rather one with which they were familiar, having experienced their own infancies and childhoods, as well as times of illness, disability, personal vulnerability, and dying.

The suffering of the Infant Christ and, indeed, the suffering of every child, reminds us that God assumed this condition. And it is in this condition that God entrusted his very self to our care, protection, and loving service. In doing so, God dignified and sanctified the dependent interdependency of our human condition.

### **CONCLUSION**

I have attempted to tease out some important insights that we may overlook as long as we identify the suffering of Jesus Christ only with that of the Crucified Christ-Man. At first glance, setting in correspondence selected gospel themes with principles articulated in the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of the Child* may seem a bit forced, contrived, or artificial. Nonetheless, such a framework provides a thought-provoking means for exploring a few key insights for Christian communities who take up the challenge to recover and be formed by the infancy narratives, not only during Christmastide, but during ordinary time as well. How might our Christian moral imagination be illumined by the suffering of the Christ-Child? Though my proposal is not the only way to engage the question, it is one way of keeping us mindful of the theological mystery and moral implications of a God who dared to entrust his infant self to our care.

Daring to live in the shadow of the Manger invites us to a new and unusual way of understanding the fragility, dignity, and uniqueness of the

human person created in the image and likeness of God. It invites us to a new way of recognizing, loving, protecting, and serving the Christ who lives in every infant and child, and indeed, in every person. Finally, it invites us to both distinguish and make the connections between the suffering of the One who as an infant assumed our dependently human condition and thereby taught us to embrace Love, and the suffering of the One who as an adult suffered and triumphed over the forces of evil and the powers of hell that conspired to destroy Love. In the light of such differentiation, our *response to* and our *identification with* the sufferings of Christ are given new meaning and new consequence.

#### NOTES

1 Ideally, we should explore the broader interactions of manger, cross, and empty tomb. Here I explore only the lessons we can learn about human suffering and solidarity with children by drawing parallels between a theology of the cross and a theology of the manger.

2 Caryll Houselander, *The Passion of the Infant Christ* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1949), 55.

3 United Nations General Assembly, *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, Resolution 1386 (XIV) of 20 November 1959.

4 *Passion of the Infant Christ*, 60-65.

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