

Emmanuel - God with us - pierces the darkness

“Rise up in splendor. Your light has come.” The words of the prophet Isaiah foretell of the coming of the Messiah. We welcome his coming.

As we celebrate this Christmas, we hear once again the stories about Mary and Joseph seeking shelter, and finding room to lodge in the place where the animals were kept. In this story, Jesus is an infant, wrapped in “swaddling clothes” and lying in a manger. The word “manger” comes to us from the French verb “to eat.” It indicates the trough where the animals’ food would be placed. It is no coincidence that this child, who will become the bread of life for us, who will deliver us with his body and blood, comes into the world with a foretelling and foretaste of the banquet that will be fulfilled at the Last Supper.

Often, in reading Luke’s Gospel story about Jesus’ birth, it may help us to imagine the crowded situation in Bethlehem as so many people came to be counted in the census. We may be tempted to judge those innkeepers who refused a place for Mary and Joseph to stay, especially considering Mary’s condition of pregnancy. But if they had nothing to give, if they had no room, what could be expected of them? Then one innkeeper, who also had no rooms for pilgrims, felt compassion and offered what little he had: a place in the stable.

As we look back on it, knowing that Mary was the Mother of God, about to give birth to the Savior of the World, we may think we would have offered our own rooms, and moved ourselves to the stable. But given that choice now, how many of us offer lodging to the stranger who needs it? It just isn’t done.

The innkeeper who offered the place where the animals slept had a place in salvation history. By providing “such mean estate,” as the song goes, the innkeeper allows Jesus to be born in humble circumstances. Jesus became one of us, and came not as one of the lofty elite, but in the simplest circumstance. God chose to be incarnated in humility. But he needed the cooperation of others. He needed Mary to say, “Yes.” He needed Joseph to agree to take Mary into his home. And he needed

the innkeeper to open his heart to provide shelter for the Holy Family. We need to be like them, and cooperate with God in Christ's incarnation; we need to say, "yes," and welcome Jesus into our home, and provide him shelter in our hearts.

The God who by the grace of the Spirit sent his Son to redeem us, loves us passionately and wants us to share that love with our neighbors. Sharing food, clothing and shelter with others, by supporting some of the agencies profiled in this edition of The Catholic Review (see pages 12-13), is one way we develop our relationship with a God who is interpersonal.

When we do that, we shine. Pope Benedict XVI said Dec. 18 that Christians are called to be like a brightly adorned Christmas tree and shine forth Christ's brilliant light to the world. "Leaving behind its dark dress for a sparkling glow, (the tree) is transformed, it becomes the bearer of a light that is not its own but gives witness to the true light that comes to this world," he said.

Like the light that bursts forth from the stable on our cover this issue, that light can pierce the darkness of the lives you touch.