

A Cultural Crèche?



Recently I posted a picture on my Facebook page
A picture of a Frankenstein family
In a pose like the Holy Family
In a scene familiar from our Christmas celebrations.

It was surprising to some...
A little shocking to others...
Some thought it irreverent...
Some thought it borderline blasphemy...
Others thought it funny...
Still, others looked and quickly moved to another page.

But I wonder if there is not something more
Something that was left unsaid...
Implied but not understood...
Unstated but still very real, very poignant:

What is the Crèche?
It is an Old French word that comes down to us...
It means literally manger or crib...
A place where a baby lies.
The Crèche or Nativity has a special place
In the hearts and minds of many.

I also have in my home a unique Nativity scene
One of my favorite holiday specials...
The Peanuts gang (written by Charles Schultz,
Himself a believer of some renown)
Tells the Christmas story in a play
With the gang filling in the scene
Dressed in character.

It is sweet; it is touching;
It is a favorite of mine.
I know that there are others
Who have enjoyed this holiday classic
And when they see the special Nativity
They remember Linus telling the Christmas story,
From the book of Luke, the second chapter.

They see the first and are shocked.
They see the second and their hearts are warmed
But the image of the Crèche that is in everyone's mind
Is one that is more traditional...



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It adorns our Christmas cards and sits atop our mantels;
It decorates our yards and homes;
It is seen in the public square, public and private alike
It is seen in our churches, on display,
Some times with living characters,
Some times on miniature display adorning the altar

We see pictures of the nativity...
We envision the presence of the mild animals gathered
To pay homage to the newborn king.

We imagine the presence of the wise men looking,
Giving honor and special gifts to the child of Bethlehem!
We picture the scene of shepherds, whispering to themselves,
Confirming the story told to them by the angels in the field.
We notice the presence of Mary and Joseph, sitting in the stillness of night,
Wondering, contemplating, perhaps even worshipping
This child born into their care.
We catch a glimpse of the center of attention,
The babe wrapped in swaddling clothes
The child laying silently in the manger...
The promised one of Israel... The Newborn King
The Savior, the Redeemer, the Immanuel.

We observe the traditional scene and suddenly all is well
The disturbing vision of the Frankenstein rapidly disappearing...
The comforting image of the Peanuts gang slowly fading...
Giving way to the honoring, worshipful, "respectful"
Image of the Crèche.

And yet, I wonder if this image,
One so seared in our mind and memory
If it really captures the truth of the story.
The real manger of the Jesus of Nazareth was somewhat different...
From any of these imaginations.

It was probably in a cold, dark, dank, wet cave;
One that housed the stable animals of those traversing Bethlehem's streets.
It was a noisy place...listen closely and you will hear
The mooing of the cows,
The braying of the donkeys
The clucking of the chickens
The bleating of the sheep and goats
You may overhear the shouts of merchants and travelers
Trying to find a place of rest for their animals
And perhaps even for themselves.

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You take a deep breath and try to silence the noise,
And what do you notice but the stench...
Feted stalls, dirty hay, dusty crevices
You smell the smell of the farm, the stable, the barn
And like one who has been accustomed to the scent
This image of the Crèche has always had a sanitized smell

The old hymn celebrates the birth of the baby...
Declaring it occurred on a Silent Night...
Telling us that the child wrapped in swaddling clothes,
No crying he did make
But is the hymn right...I'm sorry to disappoint.
Jesus, as with all babies,
Would probably have been startled with the first donkey's bray,
And cried for the attention of his loving mother and doting father.
He would grow hungry – and cry to be fed.
He would become soiled – and need to be changed.
He was a baby – in every sense of the word.

The shepherds were there of course,
Not my word but the story of the scripture.
But were they silent – probably not.
They were abuzz confirming to one another what they were seeing
And they were discussing what they were going to do now.

The wise men probably were not there –
Arriving at a house sometime later
According to the storied account in Matthew's Gospel.
There is probably much that the “traditional” Crèche does not contain
And that is ok

Because it really isn't about the picture –
It is what is behind the picture.
It is evidence that God came and dwelt among us...
It is proof that God cared enough to act on our behalf...
It is testimony to the depths of God's love...
It is a witness of the magnificent message of Immanuel –
God with us...God for us!

So any nativity, any crèche, any picture of that scene
Is just that to me – just a picture...

Whether the picture is humorous (or contemptuous) –
A la' Frankenstein and his family...
Or whether it is warm, touching and heartening –

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Like the Peanuts gang telling the story...
Or it is the vision of the traditional crèche in our celebrations –

Don't ever forget – it is not about the picture.
It is about the Savior.
It is not about the images – right, wrong, weird, usual or strange.
It is about the fact that God entered the world...
To face our fears and our sins.
To confront our disobedience and demonstrate his love.
To transform us by His wondrous Spirit
To conform us into the image of his Resurrected Son.

I hope that the picture you envision is more...
Than just a cultural image of a holiday;
Than just something humorous to capture our attention;
Than something that comes out one time a year

I hope that the picture you envision...is more than just the picture.
I know it is for me...and I will always be grateful
For the Savior born in that stinking, noisy, crowded stable long ago!
I will always remember the Savior who came –
No matter what is in the picture...I see something more!