

Christmas 2017
LK 2:1-14

Luke, chapter 2, verse 7, is the saddest verse of sacred scripture in the entire Bible:

She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

Caesar Augustus had much power and much wealth. With the snap of his finger, he set much of the civilized world in motion. It was a favorite occupation of his to compile a register of the populations so all the world could be taxed. According to ancient Jewish custom, the census was taken not where you lived, but where you belonged as members of the original twelve tribes of Israel. So for Mary and Joseph then, this meant they had to journey nearly 100 miles. Though poor people from Nazareth in the north, they had the blood of kings in their veins, and belonged to the ancient and royal town of Bethlehem in the south. Their emperor was Caesar Augustus; their country was Palestine; their king was Herod. As Caesar was filled with power and wealth, Herod was filled with a cruel and paranoid mind. He was guilty of every crime. His palace swam in blood, having murdered his wife and three of his sons.

He was unpopular and therefore he was paranoid, afraid of every possible aspirant to the throne, a mere Babe included. Such was the sorry state of civil government in Palestine at the coming of the Savior that first Christmas 2017 years ago.

In 2017, it's easier to criticize a President than to be one. Fighting terrorism at home and abroad, there are only so many dollars to go around, and government assistance to the poor is never enough. When I was pastor at Holy Trinity in Long Branch, that city took a beating from the media, alleging eminent domain abuse and neglecting the poor. Other towns like Holmdel and Medford just take advantage of the Mount Laurel II obligation, yet most New Jersey residents don't even know what the Mount Laurel obligation is. There are no easy answers. Such is the state of civil government in New Jersey at the coming of the Savior this Christmas, 2017.

In religion, as in civil government in Palestine, the fall was equally low. In appearance, all seemed well, but that's as deep as the spiritual life was. Religion had sadly declined. The externals had multiplied, but the inner spirit had disappeared. In olden times, no matter how sinful the nation had sometimes been, it produced in its worst periods, charismatic religious leaders and prophets who held high the connection between

Israel as God's people and Yahweh as Israel's God. But 2017 years ago, the religious leaders were the Pharisees. Their job was to hold Israel distinct from the other nations, which would have been a noble idea as long as the distinction was holiness. But it was far more difficult to be holy than observing their external customs regarding:

- ✓ fasts
- ✓ and dress
- ✓ and washings
- ✓ and animal sacrifices.

They lost sight of the fact that it was personal character, it was love for God and love for man, not external practices, that set one apart from others. Unfortunately for them, what was most:

- ✓ spiritual,
- ✓ living,
- ✓ human
- ✓ and loving

in the Scriptures, they passed over. To coin the old phrase, they missed the spirit of the Law to follow the letter of the Law. They replaced moral obligation with ritual observance. Such was the sorry state of religion in Palestine at the coming of the Savior that first Christmas 2017 years ago.

Take home a copy of the bulletin and read all that's happening at St. Mary of the Lakes. Finding an available room for any parish organization to meet is more difficult than it has been in recent years; hence the reason we need to build more offices and more meeting rooms. Parish membership is up. Parish volunteerism is up. Barely a week goes by without an opportunity to sign up to do something in the Jackson Rd. entrance.

A prime example is the St. Vincent DePaul Society, a ministry of St. Mary of the Lakes since 1980, serving the Burlington County communities of Medford, Medford Lakes, Browns Mills, Pemberton Township, and Moorestown. SVDP is supported by the parishioners, our school, and the Medford community. Donations can be delivered to the food pantry and Thrift Store on Jones Road. During the last 12 months we have been able to help more than 14,000 men, women, and children with:

- ✓ spiritual assistance,
- ✓ food,
- ✓ clothing,
- ✓ and financial help for rent and mortgage,
- ✓ auto insurance,

- ✓ utilities,
- ✓ health care,
- ✓ and other expenses

valued at more than \$500,000. Our outreach included more than:

- ✓ 2,700 telephone calls,
- ✓ 600 food deliveries,
- ✓ and 200 home visits.

Nearly 600 families received dinner, gifts, and essential items for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter.

Let me throw out one more statistic. While attendance has climbed steadily these past three years, there's about 75 percent of our parishioners who rarely, if ever attend Mass. Such is the state of religion at St. Mary of the Lakes at the coming of the Savior this Christmas, 2017.

The emperor's hand forced the weary couple southward for 100 miles until they reached the gate of the town, he terrified with the anxiety of a wife about to give birth, she dead with fatigue. The inn was crowded with strangers, bent on the same errand as themselves, all registering to be taxed. No room at the inn, they cleared the corner of the yard.

And because there was no hand to help them or bed to receive the Babe, the saddest verse of sacred scripture in the entire Bible, Luke, chapter 2, verse 7 was recorded:

she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Such was the birth of Jesus 2017 years ago.

If the latest census in 2010 were taken this year, 2017, and the weary couple were forced eastward for 100 miles, they would reach the signs that read, "Medford," he terrified with the anxiety of a wife about to give birth, she dead with fatigue. And if while walking the streets of Medford tonight/last night, they happened upon a parishioner registered at St. Mary of the Lakes, I hope and pray they would run into a parishioner who comes to Church. At least they would have some sense of where they could find help for the expectant couple. Because then, the saddest line of sacred scripture, Luke chapter 2, verse 7 could be rewritten:

"And they were received by a parish in that city, where there were hands to help them, and a bed to receive Him."