CHRISTMAS IN A TIME OF NO ROOM

Daniel Ang

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"She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7).

The Gospels are full of intricate details which push us back not only into the time of Jesus but into an awareness that these events are not merely historical but indeed *historic*. The verse given above is just such a text.

Luke's inclusion of a seemingly mundane and incidental detail – "there was no place for them in the inn" – has been read throughout tradition not only in its literal meaning (the "inn" was likely a guest room at the front of a first-century dwelling) but also in its allegorical or spiritual sense.

Specifically, the "crowded inn" has long been interpreted as a sign foretelling the ultimate rejection of Jesus on the Cross. Even in his infancy, Jesus experiences the refusal of his person, the denial of hospitality in the world for which he has come. Jesus later tells his disciples, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). Exile and hardship will meet those follow the way of God.

In a small collection of prose, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, the twentieth century spiritual master Thomas Merton applies a similar reading to Luke's "inn with no room" though he breaks open its meaning via an eschatological lens.

This is fitting because for Christians the beginning of the story also contains its end. With the birth of Christ arrives the fullness of time, a new creation which is at the same time a fulfilment of the promises of God. The Promised One has arrived in the world as its consummation.

Writing in the late 1960s, Merton reads the crowded inn of Luke's narrative as the embodiment of a society "filled up" with alienated persons, marshalled together in their collective passivity. Of course, Luke reports that the Bethlehem inn was congested on account of the Census of Quirinius which saw the masses of Syria and Judea pour in to centres of registration to be counted for the purpose of taxation. Merton adds a further intent – to determine those eligible for service in the armies of the empire. This gathering expresses, then, for Merton the instrumentality of a mass movement which places the "cause" above the individual person. This is no proper place to be born.

It is outside this inert conformity, this mass of non-persons, counted "members" of a concocted establishment, that "the Great Joy" is announced. It is beyond the turbulent multitudes and the frantic exercise of power and domination that the fullness of time, the consummation of humanity's hope, is revealed in Jesus Christ.

It is not surprising that in this time of no room, the arrival of the Son of God is barely heard or perceived. The uniqueness of Christ's person is ignored because there is no room or space among the assembled crowds for the Good News, only the banter and mechanical noise of a well-regulated but ultimately lifeless system.

In the end "the Great Joy" is recognised only by those who remain well outside the agitation of the crowd and its conventionality, by those who are in the fields, the shepherds and the lowly, by those who remain poor in spirit and untouched by the hysteria and din of the habitual inhumanity that surrounds them.

The contemporary significance is not difficult to recognise. Notwithstanding common derision and parody of the Church as an unthinking mass, a hopeless confection of routine and ritualism, our communion in faith can never savour of such automatism if it is to be faithful to its calling: the birth of authentic humanity in the encounter with God who has come in Christ. This conversion in love, Merton reminds us, is the mark of *persons*, not an organisation. Thus, the Church is not a mechanism of collective life or yet another system among others but a living organism, a living body constituted by faith in one who lives.

In his own time Merton recognised the challenge posed to such a "new creation" in our personal depths by a culture of disenchantment, filled with what he described as "greedy machinery" and "artificial tensions". He writes, with relevancy for our own day,

We live in the time of no room . . . The primordial blessing, "increase and multiply," has suddenly become a haemorrhage of terror. We are numbered in billions, and massed together, marshalled, numbered, marched here and there, taxed, drilled, armed, worked to the point of insensibility, dazed by information, drugged by entertainment, surfeited with everything, nauseated with the human race and with ourselves, nauseated with life.

For Merton, the "inn" of Luke's Gospel stands for this deep alienation of humanity in the midst of its own self-assured busyness, slogans and ambition. Life cannot flourish here because God cannot be born in such a place.

The newborn Christ is discovered not in the marketplace, among the calculative economy of the season, but in the "upper rooms" of prayer and thanksgiving that count for nothing in the history of the world. This is where the Spirit of the Risen Christ is born anew in the hearts of the expectant.

The birth of the Holy Child announces the sanctity of the human person. However, we will be made anew in Him only outside the shapeless and passive mass of the Bethlehem inn. It is this personal union with Christ, our sharing in his life as disciples, not as bystanders to "the Great Joy" but as participants, which constitutes both the invitation and demand of the Christmas mystery we celebrate.