

## The Manger: An Image that Challenges the Way We Live Our Lives

It is Christmas day today, for some it has been a blue Christmas season. In a pensive mood they reflected on bereavements, loss, unexpected twists and turns and existential agonies. For some others the uncertainties that the pandemic rang in keeps them in a state of turmoil finding it hard to navigate their way through the Labyrinthine paths. Some others despite the restrictions in the name of safety long to celebrate. Amidst all these it is worthwhile to ask the question “what really is Christmas?”

Of the many images that we normally connect to Christmas one very powerful one is that of ‘the manger’. In Luke 2 we read “Mary gave birth to the first born and placed him in a manger since there was no room for them in the inn”. The question that has perplexed many is ‘why the manger?’ The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Saviour of the Universe could have opted for the most cosy place for birth, why then the manger?

Of the several answers offered the first and most poignant one is the identification with **spacelessness**. Today there are several people suffering not able to find their space. We could call them refugees, guests of the state, migrant workers, wanderers, victims of war and violence, offshoots of modern-day slavery, the differently abled, the gender challenged – the Mary’s and Joseph’s of today- the meandering people. The saviour of the universe is perhaps saying ‘I understand because I have gone through it before. I will be Immanuel. With you- in your moments of vulnerability.

The manger also challenges us not to complain of not having enough. Not enough space, not enough recognition, not enough power, not enough money... the opposite of the manger is not mansion, but it is murmuring. I have not enough space, not enough power, not enough, not enough. The manger challenges that mindset and world view.

Secondly, the manger is all about **accessibility**. The shepherds and the wise men could equally have access to pay homage to the newborn baby. It continues to challenge us of the accessibility quotient of not only our sacred spaces and but also our private spaces. Does the poor, the ordinary and the marginalised have access? Does the home bound, sick, and those in palliative care have access? The saviour of the universe being born in a manger is declaring forth that everyone has access to him, to offer gifts, bow down and worship and to experience the bliss of the presence of the Divine- the Word becoming flesh.

Thirdly, the manger is a big message of **simplicity**. All that we need is just a little space. In our quest to build mansions in the name of the one born in a manger we forget that the gospel is all about simplicity. The manger offers therefore a powerful critic of the pompous ways of those who claim to be the disciples. The extravagance of our private and public rituals (that the pandemic challenged a lot) need to be revisited through the lens of the manger.

Fourthly, the overarching **shadow of the cross** over the manger cannot be overlooked. ‘Fear not’ has been a powerful message around the infancy narratives. Jesus later said ‘foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the son of man does not have a place to lay his head’ Jesus who lived the life of a child fleeing for life, of a refugee in a faraway land and who walked the risky way to the

cross was always aware of the temporariness of the earthly abodes. An understanding that would surely make us less consumeristic.

Fifthly, the **sustainability** of the manger is a message that we cannot ignore given the eco sensitive debates that is going on around creation care. The Manger could be one of the most eco sensitive spaces closest to nature. The habitat questions including the responsibility of ensuring a sustainable living space for generations yet to be, should be read around the manger. You and I cannot ignore the call to be eco-sensible in our behaviour, in our interactions and in our dealing with technology.

Sixthly, the manger and the truffle in which the child was placed is a very strong image every time we bless the crib. The truffle is the feeding space of the cattle therefore it is a pointer towards not only the bread of life who promised all those who are hungry and thirsty to be fed but also challenges us to much deeper ethical responsibilities towards **food justice** and food security.

Much more can be said but the manger is a typical example how an ordinary place can become extraordinary with the presence of the babe of Bethlehem. Christ can change the ordinary into extraordinary, ordinary people, ordinary families, ordinary places, they can all be transformed as blessed spaces.

The babe of Bethlehem, the baby in the manger thus continue to challenge us. Let us ponder deeper into the significance of the manger today and thus make Christmas meaningful to all.

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