

Harvey Ehrlich wrote this piece called POLITICALLY CORRECT SANTA

'Twas the night before Christmas and Santa's a wreck..../How to live in a world that's politically correct?/ His workers no longer would answer to 'Elves,'/ 'Vertically challenged' they were calling themselves.

And labor conditions at the North Pole/ Were alleged by the union to stifle the soul. / Four reindeer had vanished, without much propriety,/ Released to the wilds by the Humane Society.

And equal employment had made it quite clear/ That Santa had better not use just reindeer./ So Dancer and Donner, Comet and Cupid,/ Were replaced with 4 pigs, and you know that looks stupid!

The runners had been removed from his sleigh; / the ruts were termed dangerous by the EPA. / And people had started to call for the cops/ When they heard sled noises on their rooftops.

Second-hand smoke from his pipe/ Had his workers quite frightened,/ His fur-trimmed red suit/ Was called 'unenlightened.'

And to show you the strangeness of life's ebbs and flows,/ Rudolph was suing over unauthorized use of his nose/ And had gone on Geraldo, in front of the nation,/ Demanding millions in overdue compensation.

So, half of the reindeer were gone: and his wife, / Who suddenly said she'd had enough of this life./ Joined a self-help group, packed and left in a whiz,/ Demanding from now on her title was Ms.

And as for the gifts, why, he'd ne'er had a notion/ That making a choice could cause such a commotion./ Nothing of leather, nothing of fur, / Which meant nothing for him. And nothing for her.

Nothing that might be construed to pollute./ Nothing to aim. Nothing to shoot./ Nothing that's warlike or nonpacific./ No candy or sweets....they were bad for the tooth./ Nothing that seemed to embellish a truth.

And fairy tales, while not yet forbidden,/ Were like Ken and Barbie, better off hidden./ For they raised the hackles of those psychological/ Who claimed the only good gift was one ecological.

No baseball, no football....someone could get hurt;/ Besides, playing sports exposed kids to dirt./ Dolls were said to be sexist, and should be passe;/ And computer games would rot your whole brain away.

So Santa just stood there, disheveled, perplexed;/ He could not figure out what to do next./ He tried to be merry, tried to be gay,/ But you've got to be careful with that word today.

His sack was quite empty, limp to the ground;/ Nothing fully acceptable was to be found./ Something special was needed, a gift that he might/ Give to all without angering the left or the right.

A gift that would satisfy, with no indecision./ Each group of people, every religion;/ Every ethnicity, every hue,/ Everyone, everywhere....even you.

So here is that gift, its price beyond worth..../ "May you and your loved ones enjoy Peace on Earth." (1996)

OK, down to business. First a quick look at the significance of just 4 items of the Lucan gospel's telling of that first Christmas – a firstborn child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, laid in a manger, and excluded from

the inn. These are details brimming with significance. They symbolize truths about Jesus that are central to His identity and mission. These symbols will carry the true interpretation of the titles 'Messiah' and 'Lord.'

'Firstborn' is more than a statement of child placement. It alludes to a future time when others will receive the revelation of Jesus and live as He did. The term suggests the first of a line. A second-born, third-born, fourth-born, etc., are expected. The life of Jesus will generate a new family of followers (Mk 3:31-35). The fact that you and I are here bears testimony to this. And if you are only here once or twice a year – we're happy that you are here – you are always welcome. If you are college students home for the break and got dragged here, it's not so bad, is it? And it's the least you can do for your parents who are paying your tuition anyway! If you've never been to a Catholic church before, we're not THAT scary, are we? I even did some Latin before Mass if you're into that sort of thing! Anyway, no matter what brought us here – I'm just here because I'm the pastor! But we are ALL part of that long line that descended from that firstborn that holy night.

'No room in the inn' foreshadows a future event in Jesus' life. In Jerusalem, acknowledged as the city of David, this Son of David, Jesus, will be rejected by the chief priests and put to death on the cross. His earthly life will end as it began. At His death He will be a 'stranger in Jerusalem' (Lk 24:18), as at His birth, He is a stranger in Bethlehem. In the twin cities of David, Bethlehem and Jerusalem, there will be no room for David's son, the inheritor of the everlasting promise. The symbols of Jesus' birth tell the truth of His life.

The baby is 'wrapped in swaddling clothes.' This is a beloved child. The unloved child was not wrapped in clothes (Ezek 16:4-5). But the loved child was washed, rubbed with salt, and clothed. This truth of His belovedness is the same truth that is revealed at Jesus' baptism (Lk 3:22) when the heavenly voice calls Him the beloved Son and at the Transfiguration (Lk 9:35) when the same voice calls Him the chosen one. The swaddling clothes also tell us that this One who is divine has chosen to become completely helpless. The one who created this immense universe can't even move His arms and feet because He is all wrapped up in cloth.

'Lying in a manger' complements the swaddling clothes and points to the mission of the beloved son. The manger is a feeding trough, foreshadowing the One who becomes the Bread of Life for us in the Eucharist. And to make it even more pointed, Bethlehem means, in Hebrew, 'house of bread.' So it's a beautiful story, but once again, the details are loaded with many layers of meaning. (This adapted freely from John Shea, FOLLOWING LOVE INTO MYSTERY, p. 16-20))

OK, so what? How much of this is fact and how much of it is later pious accretion? Who knows? Volumes have been written about it. Do we dismiss these stories as fairy tales, the subject for pageants to sentimentalize over once a year come Christmas, the lovely dream that never came true? Only if we are fools do we do that, although there are many in our age who have done it, and if we are honest, there are moments of darkness when each one of us is tempted to do it. Just a lovely dream. That's all.

Who knows what the facts of Jesus' birth actually were? As for myself, the longer I live, the more inclined I am to believe in miracle, the more I suspect that if we had been there at the birth, we might well have seen and heard things that would be hard to reconcile with modern science. But of course that is not the point, because the Gospel writers are not really interested primarily in the facts of the birth but in its SIGNIFICANCE, the MEANING for them of that birth, just as the people who love us are not really interested primarily in the facts of OUR births but in what it means to them that we were born and how for them the world has never been the same again, how their whole lives were charged with a new significance. Whether there were ten million angels or just the woman herself and her husband when that child was born, the whole course of history was changed. That is a fact as hard and blunt as any fact. Art, music, literature, our culture

itself, our political institutions, our whole understanding of ourselves and our world – it is impossible to conceive of how differently world history would have developed if that child had not been born. And in terms of faith, much more must be said, because for faith the birth of the child into the darkness of the world made possible not just a new way of understanding life but a new way of living life.

Ever since that child was born, there have been people who have gotten drunk on Him no less than they can get drunk on liquor. Or if that metaphor seems crude, all the way down the centuries since that child was born, there have been countless different kinds of ways people have been filled with His Spirit, who have been grasped by Him, caught up into His life, who have found themselves in deep and private ways healed and transformed by their relationships with Him, so much so that they simply have no choice but to go on proclaiming what the writers of the Gospel first proclaimed: that He was indeed the long expected one, the Christ, Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace – all these curious and mysterious terms that we keep on using in our attempts to express in language one thing and one thing only. That in this child, in the man He grew up to be, there is the power of God to bring light into our darkness, to make us whole, to give a new kind of life to anybody who turns toward Him, even to such as you, and such as me.

This is what Luke and Matthew are trying to say in their stories about how Jesus was born, and this is the truth that no language seemed too miraculous to them to convey. This is the only truth that matters, and the wise men, the shepherds, the star are important only as ways of pointing to this truth.

Third, so what is left to us then is the greatest question of them all. How do we know whether or not this is true? How do we find out for ourselves whether in this child born so long ago there really is the power to give us a new kind of life in which both suffering and joy are immeasurably deepened, a new kind of life in which little by little we begin to be able to love even our friends, at moments maybe even our enemies, maybe at last even ourselves, even God?

ADESTE FIDELES. That is the only answer I know for people who want to find out whether or not this is true. ADESTE FIDELES, COME ALL YE FAITHFUL, and all who would like to be faithful if only we could, all who walk in darkness and hunger for light. Have faith enough, hope enough, despair enough, foolishness enough to at least draw near and see for ourselves.

He says to ask and it will be given, to seek and we will find. In other words, He says that if we pray to Him, He will come to us, and as far as I know, there is only one way to find out whether that is true, and that is to try it. Pray to Him and see if He comes, in ways that only you will recognize. He says to follow Him, to walk as He did into the world's darkness, to throw ourselves away as He threw Himself away for love of this often dark world. And He says that if we follow Him, we will end up on some kind of cross and even in that cross we will also find our heart's desire, the peace that passes all understanding. And again, as far as I know there is only one way to find out whether that is true, and that is to try it. Follow Him and see. And if the going gets too tough, we can always back out.

ADESTE FIDELES. Come and behold Him, born the king of angels. Speak to Him or be silent before Him. In whatever way seems right to us and at whatever time, come to Him with our empty hands. The great promise is that to come to Him who was born at Bethlehem is to find coming to birth within ourselves something stronger and braver, gladder and kinder and holier, than ever we knew before or than ever we could have known without Him.

Merry Christmas! Thank you for coming! Whatever we might be struggling with, may God be born again on our hearts this Christmas Day. AMEN.

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