

Post Christmas Blues

What with Advent expectations and the heightened pressure of Christmas shopping and planning of family reunions, we reach such a peak by December 25th that we've nowhere to go but down, down, down into a funk in the period after Christmas. By December 26th the tree looks old, the gifts under its boughs no longer evoke "oohs" and "aahs," the dishes remain in the washer for want of any will power to replace them on cabinet shelves and we ask ourselves: Why must Christmas always be but prelude to so profound a state of depression?

Well, to justify your post-Christmas blues, let me give you some serious liturgical and theological reasons why you should indeed be depressed after December 25th. Just look at the saints we venerate on the days after Christmas: Stephen, the Holy Innocents, Thomas Becket – martyrs all! Day after day we are confronted with red vestments, symbolic of the blood of people killed for following the infant Jesus. That's enough to cool your Christmas cheer.

Sure, the church wants us to rejoice over the arrival of someone divine in our midst and for that reason selects for the feast itself those more joyful passages from Saint Luke that tell of the Annunciation and of angels singing and shepherds prancing across the hills to Bethlehem. But after Christmas note how the church shifts into sadder gear, selecting for one liturgical year Luke's later verses about the child's future contradiction and pain, and for this liturgical year Mary's momentary loss of her son at the age of twelve. And only then do we begin to hear passages from Matthew's more ominous account of Christ's birth – with images of a ruthless King Herod and the massacre of infants and the Holy Family's flight into exile.

Christ's birth is indeed something to rejoice over, but it's also an event designed to challenge this insecure, avaricious, cynical, bullheaded, violent world of ours to become Christ-like in thought, word and deed – and the powers that be have little intention of doing that. So you can be sure the Herods of history will continue to pursue this infant Christ of ours relentlessly to crucify and bury him and his absurd gospel of grace to boot. And that's enough to make anyone sad, except that we know that Christ is the most amazing escape artist that's ever been born.

So, do we have a case of the post-Christmas blues? Theologically and liturgically speaking, it's the most appropriate (but not hopeless) way to feel, considering the kind of world our newborn Christ must confront, even in the twenty-first century. Still if it does you any good, why not imitate my Irish dad who, when deeply depressed, relieved himself with a good old Irish curse. And should you be wanting as to just what kind of curse to utter, adopt the Australian poet Amy Witting's potent *A Curse on Herod*:

May you live forever. In that eternity / may bird cries from the playground ring in your ear / incessantly. When you plan your forays, may / on your terrible blueprints starfish prints appear. // May short fierce arms be locked about your knees / wherever you turn, and small fists drag at your hem / while voices whine of weewee and ice cream. These / are your children. You have made them. Care for them. // May you have no rest. May you wake at night with a cry / chilled by a nightmare that you can't dispel. / May the bogeyman be thirty inches high / and immortal. These are your children. Guard them well.