

ONE OF CHRISTIANITY'S FINEST HOURS

Saturday, December 17, 2016

A symbol by definition is “something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationships, association, convention, or accidental resemblance.”

Something artistic that suggests ideal, states a truth. Our lives are full of symbols: wedding rings, advertisement logos, clenched fists, flags, road signs....

Symbols can be helpful most of the time. In some instances, however, they can be harmful by obscuring the reality of that which the symbol represents. It can make the reality less than real and romanticize the harsh reality.

The cross is a symbol of Christianity. It appears on church steeples (not because commanded by God, by the way!) walls, floors, books, tattoos on the arm, jewelry on the body, earrings on men. I stood in a fourth century Christian church in southern Judea once a saw a cross on the mosaic floor. The age of the church was signaled by this cross because such crosses were outlawed by an edict of Rome after the same century. Out of respect this edict was to avoid people from trampling on the cross.

What was vile in the Roman Jewish world of the Bible, the first century had become for the early church a symbol of unity, hope, joy through Christ' suffering and sacrifice. Today, this symbol worn by millions has lost its cutting edge: suffering and sacrifice has given way to jewelry looking for compliments.

Christmas also floods us with symbols. The most prominent: **the child Jesus lying in a feeding trough meant for animals.** This image at Christmas time brings forth feelings of romance, warm fires, stary eyed memories of childhood, snow, friends, family, food, drink, cards passed with nice phrases. Nothing wrong with this! **But...the symbol of Christ in a feeding trough has clouded the reality of what God was saying!!!**

Think this Christmas rather of fodder, prickly hay, animal hair, stench of animal urine and feces, fleas and lice, (go visit a barn), humility and extreme poverty.

In our **antiseptic world** would we place our first born in such an environment by choice? **Why not? Are we thinking that we are smarter than the Father? Do we love our children more than the Father for His Own Son? Did God not know that subjection to such things threaten the health, not to mention the self-image of the family? Of course He did!**

It is precisely because God the Father meant to make a clear statement to all of us. **Take this image out of the realm of symbol and see it for what it really was and is: Christianity in its finest hour! Christ the Lord is first Christ the Servant. This beginning set in motion a life directed towards the Cross.**

Something extremely real and practical for us here. Yet so often we forget this thing that God did.

This symbol should both offend us and comfort us. **OFFENSE:** That God is so treated because of our sins. **COMFORT:** That God so loved us that He stooped this low. Hear what the Angels are saying. They are focused on a viewpoint: **Majesty As Humility!**

Lk.2:1-16 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and **laid him in a manger**, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² **And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.**" ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" ¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ **And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.**

Luke 2:12 καὶ τοῦτο ὑμῖν τὸ σημεῖον, εὐρήσετε βρέφος ἐσπαργανωμένον καὶ κείμενον ἐν φάτνῃ.

σημεῖον, noun nominative neuter singular common:

(1) basically, as what serves as a **pointer to aid perception or insight** *sign, mark, distinguishing characteristic*; (2) **as what distinguishes one person or thing from another** *sign, token, mark* (LU 2.12; RO 4.11); (3) **as a miraculous event contrary to the usual course of nature and intended as a pointer or** *means of confirmation*, often used with *τέραξ* (*wonder*) *sign* (MK 13.22); as a miraculous event resulting from personal action *sign, miracle* (JN 2.11; RV 13.13)

- **The Sign** = The sign wasn't "swaddling clothes", that would have been very common for newborns. The Sign was a newborn in a feeding trough!
- **The Sign** is definite confirmation of identity. May have been other babies in Bethlehem who were lying in swaddling clothes. But **This One is the Only One in those clothes "lying in a manger."** **What is worth noting behind this specific sign is not only the confirmation as to where to find the right one, but also the location itself. A most humble beginning.**

**HERE IS THE FEEDING TROUGH SIGN.
IN THAT SIGN IS GOD THE MOVER OF HISTORY.**

The whole world is moving. Census and taxation. **Dr. Luke moves from the general to the particular. Moves from the whole world to one small couple.**

At the very moment of the registration of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem – at that very moment they arrive from Nazareth – a specific prophecy is fulfilled. This is not by personal choice (God saw to it that man didn't arrange this to be a self-fulfilling prophecy by His handlers) lest we conclude man merely arranged things to look like prophecy was fulfilled! [Who controls the place and time of his own birth?]

But by Divine and pagan governmental decree Joseph and Mary were there. Decrees over which they had no control. At the precise moment Mary goes into labor she is inside the town of Bethlehem. The Messiah **HAD to be born in Bethlehem**. Nowhere else would do. (I was once questioned about this by a searching **Yeshiva student** on Mt. Zion). Jesus didn't just arrive at a judicious moment. He ushered in an age pregnant with meaning.

Galatians 4:4-6 ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law...

Ephesians 1:9-10 ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

If God so arranged these events – He could have also arranged for a rich man to take them under shelter in a home or palace. But it is clear, God wanted, yes, **God did what none of us would do to our own babies by choice. He wanted Christ to be born in a stable!** This is a symbol surely, but it is a real symbol, an actual event with meaning: Christ came in humility and poverty to serve. He came to serve from His birth to His manhood. His life in its **entirety bears the unmistakable marks of a humble servant.** Dare we as his followers lift ourselves above this office of the master, the office of “servant”?

SERVANTHOOD IS THE MARK OF THE CHRIST. And it remains the mark of His real followers. Read the NT: THIS SYMBOL REVERBERATES THROUGH ITS ENTIRETY:

Romans 1:1 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

James 1:1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

2 Peter 1:1 Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

Revelation 1:1-2 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known

by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

The mark of an orthodox faith isn't just "man, I believe in Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world." It is also "I believe in Jesus the Servant to sinners like me." The Infant Jesus and the Man Jesus get at it:

Matthew 20:26-28 ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Take this description of Jesus in a feeding trough out of the realm of romantic symbol and put it squarely in the center stage of real life calling of the Christ and of your own life this Christmas.

JESUS CAME TO GIVE BY SERVING

Never are we more like God than when we serve. **Swindoll:**

“Shortly after World War II came to a close, Europe began picking up the pieces. Much of the Old Country had been ravaged by war and was in ruins. Perhaps the saddest sight of all was that little orphaned children starving in the streets of those war-torn cities.

Early one chilly morning an American soldier was making his way back to the barracks in London. As he turned the corner in his jeep, he spotted a little lad with his nose pressed to the window of a pastry shop. Inside the cook was kneading dough for a fresh batch of doughnuts. The hungry boy stared in silence, watching every move. The soldier pulled his jeep to the curb, stopped, got out, and walked quietly over to where the little fellow was standing. Through the steamed-up window he could see the mouth-watering morsels as they were being pulled from the oven, piping hot. The boy salivated and released a slight groan as he watched the cook place them onto the glass-enclosed counter ever so carefully.

The soldier's heart went out to the nameless orphan as he stood beside him. **“Son...would you like some of those?”**

The boy was startled. “Oh, yes...I would!”

The American stepped inside and bought a dozen, put them in a bag, and walked over to where the lad was standing in the foggy cold of the London morning. He smiled, held out the bag, and said simply: “Here you are.”

As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his coat. He looked back and heard the child ask quietly: “**Mister...are you God?**”

We are never more like God than when we give. “God so loved the world that He gave...” (Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve* 52-53)

The Son of Almighty God in a Stable? Feeding trough? Both? Separate from humanity, placed with donkeys. Arrived in a lowly place, departed in a despised place with common thieves. **What kind of Savior is this?**

JESUS SERVED BY HUMBLING HIMSELF

HOW FAR UP IS HEAVEN?

How far down is time from eternity?

Earth from infinity?

Stables from the Throne of God?

NT WRITERS STAND IN AMAZEMENT AT LUKE’S ACCOUNT:

Philippians 2:5-8 ⁵ Have **this mind** among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ **who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,** ⁷ **but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.** ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of **death**, even death on a **cross**.

2 Corinthians 8:9 ⁹ For you know the **grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.**

EX: Impressed by a personal friend willing to follow Christ as He leads. **Bob Wilmarth**, outstanding **Veterinary Surgeon**...beautiful home...successful...secure...left it to work with Navajo, then Haitians, then Central America among Indians. Help with animals and share the Gospel.

God may or may not call you to a life of poverty, but...

YOU MUST BE PREPARING TO HUMBLE YOURSELF FOR CHRIST. (Not saying “Willing to humble yourself but preparing to stay comfortable; rather, preparing to humble yourself but only slightly willing to stay comfortable.”) Move from passive to active sacrificial preparation and involvement.

I have known and heard many times of Christians who follow Christ into a ministry only to take scorn from parents and relatives. You are throwing your life away. Christ calls us to take less today in order to have more tomorrow.

Be preparing now to help those in need, leave the security of home, environment, friends, and schedule. Have Christ's attitude: share the gospel, baby sit, labor, clean a house, financial aid, food, visit, fix a meal, and humble yourself to menial tasks.

JESUS SERVED BY GIVING HIS LIFE

HIS FIRST APPEARING: STABLE AND SHEPHERDS

- Look at the historical context of His birth. It is appropriate that he should **arrive at birth among the shepherds** (those who attended in the **environs of Bethlehem tended the Temple Flocks destined for sacrifice**) and **in the place for gathering of sheep and cattle**. Christ from birth meant not only to protect His sheep as the Shepherd-Servant, but also to be numbered among the sheep and to die as a sin sacrifice.
- As humble servant Christ gave His life. This started with his arrival on Christmas morning in a feeding trough. Good reason to believe that the Lord was laid in a "feeding trough" which was common usage. Whether this was a stall or trough – the striking thing is that Jesus was placed in the location of animals and not among living quarters of men. Jesus arrived among the lowly animals and He departed on a cross with common thieves. No one will ever have the right to say to God "you didn't understand my circumstances. You didn't minister to me. I didn't follow you because you could not identify with the hardships of my life."

Join with shepherds in glorifying God and praising Him for what He has done (2:20).

Luke 2:20 ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

You've got to get a perspective here! It's all where you are coming from! The Angels and Shepherds lived worlds apart!!!

Angels knew the greatness of Christ's pre-incarnate glory. They also knew the depth of man's fall. They stood in awe of God's love to such depraved men. This is seen in the parallelism of the saying:

Luke 2:13-14 ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "**Glory to God in the highest**, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

- **God/men...highest/earth...glory/peace.**
- **Jesus' poverty-stricken beginning must have caused the angels much awe if not outright consternation!** And no less for the shepherds. **WHY WOULD GOD'S SON BEGIN IN SUCH A LOW AND DIRTY PLACE? WHY NOT? SIN REQUIRED DRASTIC MEASURES!**

- **Even OT prophets had a glimpse of this stuff that fascinated the Angels...**

1 Peter 1:10-12 ¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, **the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully,** ¹¹ inquiring **what person or time** the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when **he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.** ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, **things into which angels long to look.**

1 Peter 2:21 - 3:1 ²¹ **For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.** ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

If Christ was willing to appear in a place meant for sheep whose life meant little, then let us also follow his goal of servant hood by giving our lives afresh to God and to others this Christmas and throughout the year.

If you are getting tired of serving, then you are getting tired of Christ.
For His example has been made and the charge is for us to follow that example.

Ruth Harms Calkin:

You know, Lord, how I serve you with great emotional fervor in the limelight. You know how eagerly I speak for You at women's club. You know how I effervesce when I promote a fellowship group. You know my genuine enthusiasm at a Bible study. But how would I react, I wonder, if you pointed to a basin of water and asked me to wash the calloused feet of a bent and wrinkled old woman day after day month after month in a room where nobody saw and nobody knew.

This is the spirit of Christmas.

- **Become a nobody for Somebody.**
- **Be a nothing for He Alone who is Something.**
- **Be spent in anonymity for Him who shall repay in public.**
- ***God sent Jesus to a stall to make a clear statement from the start: He came to serve.***
- **God's gift at Christmas is therefore leaving us with a clear trumpet call: **will I hear and follow?****
 - **Not sure of your relationship to Christ? Trust...talk to an elder down front...**

- **Are sure: remain true to Jesus' purpose for your life...serve...give...**