

## Reflection for 26-1-25 by Anne Burden

This reflection comes towards the end of the Christmas and Epiphany season. In about ten days we enter Ordinary Time for a few weeks - until Lent begins on Ash Wednesday when we are invited to follow the way of the cross through Lent and Holy Week to the Easter celebration of the Resurrection. The Christmas story has been well and truly told, the decorations are packed up and back in the loft - but churches and some homes still have crib scenes on display as a reminder that the season is not yet over. We've stopped singing Christmas carols in our services - but the familiar words still lodge somewhere inside us: -

He came down to earth from heaven,  
who is God and Lord of all,  
and his shelter was a stable,  
and his cradle was a stall.  
With the poor and mean and lowly,  
lived on earth our Saviour holy.

The image of the baby in the manger is still a powerful one, but the message of Christmas in the last line of that verse from "Once in Royal David's city" is not 'lived on earth' but 'lives on earth'. Because of the first Christmas, Jesus lives with us now - always and forever. He hasn't joined the Christmas decorations in the loft, but lives in our troubled and suffering world as Emmanuel - God with us. The task of the remainder of the Christmas season is to work out what this means. Where is Jesus now? Where can we find him?

I'm going to recount a story by Anthony de Mello which may guide our thoughts. Anthony de Mello was a member of the Jesuit province of Bombay, and was widely known for his retreats and workshops on prayer, and for his spiritual teaching which often used the medium of 'story'. Sadly, he died suddenly in 1987, but his books remain.

A holy man was sitting in prayer when he realised that he had an unexpected visitor in front of him. It was the abbot of a local monastery who was distressed that hard times had come upon his community. People no longer flocked there to nourish their spirits, the church was silent, and the handful of monks remaining went about their duties with heavy hearts. The abbot wanted to know the reason for this decline, and asked "Is it because of some sin of ours?" The holy man said "Yes - it is a sin of ignorance. One of your number is the Messiah in disguise - and you are in ignorance of this."

The abbot worried about what this meant as he returned to the monastery. Who could this be? Brother Cook, Brother Treasurer, Brother Prior? No - they all had too many faults - but one had to be the Messiah. Who could it be? The Messiah was supposed to be in disguise - so perhaps it could be this one or that ..... The monks couldn't work out how to recognise the Messiah, so they took to treating everyone with respect and consideration, because "you never know - maybe this is the one ....."

Before long the atmosphere in the monastery changed - it became vibrant with joy. The number of monks and visitors increased, and once again the church echoed with the holy and joyful chant of monks aglow with the spirit of love.

We don't know what happened to Jesus when he left the manger, lived his earthly life, died and rose again. But we know his promise that he would be with us always - to the end of time. So how would it be, I wonder, if we behaved to everybody as if they were the Messiah? How would it be if we treated God's world as his gift to us and the place where he lives and has his being? How would it be if we looked for the spark of God in ourselves, and always tried to live to his glory? Perhaps the world might then be a very different place, and its people might be more joyful, loving and fulfilled.