

BRUTON PARISH CHURCH  
Christmas Eve, 2009

What are you doing here? If you're here for the Childrens' Christmas pageant, I'm afraid we held that last Saturday at 4 in the afternoon. This one-off annual production was amazing to behold. A theatrical extravaganza. There was a very fine camel and a donkey - played to great critical acclaim by two people, each more convincing than the last. There were flocks of shepherds, various sheep, three kings, umpteen angels, narrators, Mary, Joseph and a very well-behaved baby - soon to be baptized right down there in the font.

The cast, though large, was not the largest I have seen: in a Christmas Pageant in Chicago, there were three Virgin Marys and six wise people, one of whom was wrapped in tinsel from head to toe. Almost a cast of thousands, in its small way. P.T. Barnum would have been proud. Theological purists might have objected but Pageants are more about great fun than scholarly exactitude.

Here, lines of scripture were declaimed. Songs were sung. Loudly. It was all very jolly and I'll bet you're sorry you missed it. A pageant is a sort of play held in a church, as in a theatre: ours takes place on a stage constructed down there in the crossing and the aisle.

Noises off. There's a stage direction in the theatre which says, "Noises off." It means that off stage, out of the audience's sight, there come noises: cheering crowds, cannon fire, choirs of angels, that sort of thing. Noises off. You and I focus on the stage but the noises off contribute to the background: they are the context. In the children's pageant there is no need to have noises off: we have all the noises we could possibly want (some would say more) right here in church but kindly Colonial Williamsburg punctuates

our prayers and hymns by firing cannons down the street. If the baby Jesus isn't shocked into an outcry, it is the first true miracle of Christmas.

What are you doing here? What do you seek? Silent night, holy night. O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. How silently, how silently, the Holy gift is given. Look. Hold your breath and listen. We are in Bethlehem two thousand years ago.

In the middle of the stage is a manger, lit only by winter starlight. No sensible person lights candles or lanterns in a stable full of straw. It is quite dark.

Sitting or reclining beside the manger is a young woman. She is too exhausted to say anything. She is, perhaps, a shy, quiet girl anyway, but she has just given birth, a very tiring event. In the manger, a trough for feeding animals, is a new born baby. Asleep, as the old song tells us, asleep in the hay.

Sitting, or standing beside them is a man with dark circles under his eyes. He is silent, he too is tired out - by his travels, his responsibility, and from witnessing the birth of his new son. Silent, exhausted, and happy.

There may be cattle. Certainly there is at least one donkey. Anyone raised on a farm with livestock knows that at night animals are quiet. The oxen, the cattle, are not lowing. They shuffle their feet, there is the occasional splash and splatter. The animals are as quiet as the three humans.

Noises off. Even in the stable you can hear them. It is a holy night, though not a silent one, out there, offstage. The streets of downtown Bethlehem are packed, chaotic. Late night shoppers, celebrating Saturnalia, push and shove at rubber-necking tourists and the crowds in town to register for Caesar Augustus' census. Slaves shouting, "Io

Saturnalia!" are behaving badly, but then at Saturnalia, they always do. Small gifts, sigillaria, are being exchanged as they always are at this Festival.

The men at the bar are talking about the huge ten-mile tail back on the Bethlehem by-pass. An ox cart jack-knifed and it was nose to derriere; camels, donkeys, a cohort of very angry Roman Auxiliary cavalry, for hours. Confusion Corner was jammed solid with tourist chariots not knowing which way to turn or where to park. Drivers shouting and exhibiting road rage: a real mess and when are they going to add another lane and fix those potholes?

Both the Bethlehem Inn and the Bethlehem Lodge are full of noisy people celebrating: of course there is no room, there never is at this time of the year! This is an official Roman pagan festival. Another slow year; the economic downturn of the last five years has hurt business badly, but things are improving, they say. Groups are singing at the top of their lungs. There is a good deal of excess: Nothing exceeds like excess! Too much rich food is being eaten, vast quantities of wine are being drunk, "Io Saturnalia!" by those who have anything to eat at all.

In the Roman officer's mess, a toast is being drunk to the Emperor, the divine Augustus. The soldiers stand to attention and shout out their toast to the returning sun, "Sol Invictus!" They all hope not to be still deployed to the Middle East next Saturnalia: Judea in Palestine is not a safe posting. There has been a lot of terrorist activity in Nazareth....

The noise is fainter out in the hills above the noisy, smelly town: sheep are munching and occasionally bleating. And a thin cold wind blows across the bare hillside stirring the grasses on Bethlehem Down.

The starlit sky still shivers with a silvery distant echo of unimaginable angels singing "Glory to God in the Highest. And Peace to His people on earth."

And you are here. What are you doing here? Are you here, like the animals, for the warmth and the quiet? Are you here to get away from the crowds and the traffic and the noise of Saturnalia?

Despite our irresistible urge to sing loud carols, perhaps you will find what you seek here. Perhaps you will find your heart's desire. Perhaps, just for a while, in the Holy Presence, you too will find peace on earth and good will in the hearts of those smiling faces around you.

Watch and listen, for the song of the angels has become very faint and the noise in the street has grown ever louder. Watch and listen: this is the holy and silent night on which the Son of God is born.