

## **He Came Looking For Us Christmas 2009**

Walking down Chester St East recently I was greatly surprised to see a lamb nuzzling the grass by the footpath fence. They have got chooks there too on that long lawn. No doubt there will be a few lambs on Christmas tables this year, but there is a wider significance to these innocent little creatures. We think of them as being passive and easy to scare, but that is not the way they operate in the Christian story - more about that later.

I want to ask you now to remember how and when your Christian walk began. It will be a different story for every one of us, for the Holy Spirit has a thousand and one ways of connecting with the varied life situations of all the folk he is longing to give himself to. But if we took the time and trouble to hear each person's story about their beginning time as a Christian the chances are that most of these accounts would have a similar approach and style. It would be a tale of what they did, it would be a description of the initiative they took, to draw near to God. Often vivid Christian testimonies of sudden conversion experiences take the same tack. They are stories of a choice, of a decision, that has changed a life - look what I did is the by-line.

But is this in fact the way things happen, particularly when it comes to God's habitual approach to creating a relationship with human beings? Does he just wait for us to take a step towards him? Was it really a story of our heroic choice and dramatic decision? Just suppose it was the other way around.

If you have been opening the doors on an Advent calendar day by day these last few weeks, or if you have been attending to the readings over the Christmas season, you will notice a different rhythm and momentum going on. The angel Gabriel comes to Zechariah to tell him that he is about to become the biological father of John the Baptist. A similar scene plays out when Gabriel tells Mary that an even more dramatic change is about to take place in her life, as the Holy Spirit makes things happen in her womb in a way that the human race has never known before. Joseph is told in a dream to stick with his fiancée, even though he risks social shame in the process. Some scholar priests from over the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire start out on a journey of many, many miles, drawn by a star that has irresistibly compelled their attention. Shepherds come in from the fields, acting under instructions from a heavenly choir, to locate a very holy event in a very homely setting.

The only heroic decision that was made here was by Mary, and even then God was calling the shots and setting the agenda. In every case the flow of initiatives and the direction of the story stems from the God

ward side of the narrative. Even Herod is reacting to events that are outside his control. This is a drama in which the scriptwriter and the director is God. The actors may add a certain individual particularity to the roles, but in the end they are marching to the beat of someone else's drum.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, as the dust settled after World War 1, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth proposed a startling new agenda for the Church as a theologically reflecting community. Let's forget about justifying the ways of God to religion's cultured despisers, let's stop modifying and downsizing the Christian story to fit in with the disenchanting agendas of a secular public. Let's completely change the angle from which we start thinking about the Christian religion. Think not how does God look to a twentieth century liberal sceptic, but how does the world and its inhabitants look to God. Suppose we start viewing the human story with the events of the Bible in the foreground, and with the events of unfolding human history in the background. Whenever we pick up a pen to write about God, or mount a pulpit to preach about him, let's talk about what God has done and is doing for humankind, how he has mapped out the approach path for us to come back to him. Salvation is about what God did for us a long time ago – it is not about what we do for God - he chose us long before we chose him. Everything necessary for our salvation has been done by God – when we eventually tune in to him we are responding to a symphony that started playing long before we ever heard it.

The symbol of my theological college was the Lamb and Flag – it sounds like the name of an English pub. It is a vivid pictorial symbol in which the lamb trots forward with the flag of resurrection victory tucked in under one of its front hooves. This image sums up what the Bible talks about as the lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Lambs, as Christmas chefs can tell you, often die to benefit human beings. Jesus came into the world not to run away from trouble but to face it head on, and to do something decisive about suffering, evil and human separation from God, by following on the path of sacrifice. But rather than getting drawn into the Easter story now, I want to point out what the symbolism of Jesus as a lamb means for us at Christmas – why I got pulled up with a round turn when I saw that lamb grazing away down Chester Street East.

Jesus is the lamb who at the incarnation left the sheep pen of his Father's pasture to come looking for us. He isn't sitting around waiting for us to make the first move. He is on the move towards us – he will search us out wherever we are – because he wants to share his gentle and warmly loving and peaceful presence with us. This isn't a lamb who runs away at the first hint of danger, who gets lost on windy, rainy hillsides, who slinks away at rejection. Sure, there is vulnerability about him – he has come to us in this way because it is

the most likely form to draw and invite our response. Maybe he has got the whole wide world in his hands, but he won't use his power to boss us into believing in him.

That is the thing about some kinds of animals – they have a way about them that has a remarkable effect on human beings. I remember once watching as a big husky was brought into a restaurant. He proceeded to lie on the floor, and to look very much at home in this public place. The remarkable thing that followed wasn't just the waitress who felt compelled to kneel down beside him to pat him and to say tender things to him; it was the way the atmosphere there changed. Suddenly people started behaving in better, kinder, gentler ways.

Whatever huskies have, Jesus has too. And this Christmas he is on his way to our place. He has come looking for us.