

Will you feed, shelter and welcome Jesus?

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

Since no one would take the poor travelers in for the night (they probably have no money, and she looks as if she'll give birth at any moment, and it would be just too much of an inconvenience at such a busy time as census), God set his Christmas table in a trough used to feed animals. Little did anyone know that stingy night that God's was to be a lavish banquet of choice food, a feast of endless abundance.

"If only we had known," the innkeepers might have said later, "we would have provided a proper room for them, and a nourishing meal." But they did not, and still there is enough food forever, and room for all.

They asked very little, this weary pair, and finally someone agreed to their simple requests: just a spot out back away from the wind, among the animals would be just fine, we'll be no trouble — and yes it seems the baby will come very soon — don't worry, we have food in our sacks, and blankets, too, just a place to rest and wait, we'll pay for some hay and water for the donkey, thank you for your kindness. Shalom, good night to you as well.

And there he was born, the one through whom all things came to be. St. Luke hopes we take note that this happened in a town whose name means "house of bread," and that Jesus was placed in a manger where creatures come to feed. He needed next to nothing, this little one who would one day give everything for us.

A fifth century song for Christmas morning ("A solis ortus cardine") captured the contrast: "The blessed maker of the world assumed a servant's form ... He deigned to have hay for a bed, and did not refuse the shelter of a manger. He does not suffer even a bird to hunger, and yet he was fed with a little milk." He provides the world its food but is content with just a little for himself.

Soon strangers from the east brought gifts to the child, sensing by God's hidden wisdom that something earth-shaking was afoot. They left their riches at his feet but left with more than they had brought. Did they know whom they were visiting? One thing is certain: by grace they were changed on their star-crossed journey to the manger. St. Matthew means more than geography when he reports that they went back to their own country "by another way." The child grew in wisdom, age and grace. Still asking little or nothing, he gave everything to the poor and confused, the forsaken and lost, the stingy and ungrateful. They sought him out by the thousands. "I am the bread of life," he would tell them. "No one who comes to me will ever be hungry."

He would prove his love to the end, by the end he suffered on the cross. A soldier pierced him with a lance, and from his side sprang a fountain of blood and water. Having given his body and blood for us, the banquet was eternally set — the only banquet we would ever need, the Eucharist we share even today, and will forever.

He is our brother (flesh of our flesh), our food (satisfying Word and Precious Body and Blood), our Savior (God from all ages, our origin and destiny). Will we feed on him? That is the invitation of Christmas.

But there is another invitation, too: Will we feed him? Will we bring him our gifts? After all, he asks so little.

The truth is, we have the chance to recognize and welcome him, to feed him and shelter him, every day. John Paul I, who served as pope for just 33 days in 1978, once wrote that parents, by caring for their children, honor Jesus. "Husbands and wives are themselves Magi, who deposit their gifts at the foot of that cradle every day: privations, anxieties, nightlong vigils, detachment. They receive other gifts in return, new impulses to live and become holy, a joy

purified by sacrifice, the renewal of their mutual affection, and a fuller communion of souls.” That is the way he intended it to be: that we would let him feed us, and filled with him we would feed the world. Learning to love as he loved, we would find how rich is his banquet, how inexhaustible his generous love. Whether mothers or fathers, sons or daughters, priests or religious, nurses or teachers or leaders of nations, that is the way he intends it to be. We who have the privilege of knowing who he is — unlike the miserly innkeepers of the first Christmas — are to let him in. He will feed us, and we will become food ourselves.

On that night when no one was in any mood to take poor strangers in, God poured out his heart to us, giving us what was most precious to him, his only Son. We are Magi, too, and lay gifts at his feet every time we love as he loved.

May we know him in prayer, in sacrament, in love, in daily life. He asks so little and gives us everything.

Merry Christmas!

Do you have an intention for Bishop Sartain’s prayer? If so, send it to him at Bishop Sartain’s Prayer List, Diocese of Little Rock, 2500 North Tyler St., P.O. Box 7239, Little Rock, AR 72217.