

A Room in the Heart: The Christmas Call to Welcome

My Sisters and Brothers

As Christmas approaches, the familiar story of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter in Bethlehem takes on new meaning for those of us reflecting on how we live today. The innkeeper's lack of space has long symbolised the world's rejection of Christ, yet this Christmas season invites us to consider a more hopeful question: Do we have room in the inn of our hearts?

The volunteers who serve in our communities - at shelters, food banks, hospitals and homes for the elderly - embody the spirit of that original Christmas welcome. They understand something profound: that making space for another person is sacred work. These men and women, often working without fanfare or recognition, mirror the example Jesus set throughout his ministry. They feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoner, fulfilling the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself.

This Advent season especially reminds us that Christmas was never meant to be a celebration confined to our homes and families alone. Jesus came into the world as a vulnerable child, dependent on the care of strangers. The story of his birth emphasises hospitality - the willingness to welcome the unexpected guest, to make space when everything seems full. In a world where homelessness, loneliness, and isolation touch so many lives, this ancient narrative speaks urgently to our present moment.

The Catholic tradition emphasises that all human beings bear the image and likeness of God. When we welcome the stranger, we welcome Christ himself. This isn't merely poetic language; it's a call to action. The letter to the Hebrews says, '*Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.*' (13:2) The volunteers among us seem to understand this mystery in their bones. They see Christ's face in every person they serve.

Yet hospitality requires more than grand gestures. It begins with small acts: a warm greeting, genuine attention, the willingness to listen. It means recognising that in our busyness and abundance, we often rush past the people God places in our path. We pass by without truly seeing. The invitation this Christmas is to pause, to look and to make room.

Making room in the inn of our hearts also means examining our own lives. What preoccupies us? What fills our hearts so completely that there's no space for others? Sometimes it's fear, sometimes it's indifference, sometimes it's simply the weight of our own struggles. Yet Jesus teaches that it's in the very act of making space for others that we find healing and wholeness ourselves.

The volunteers know this secret. They discover, often to their surprise, that in giving they receive far more than they give. In serving those on society's margins, they encounter the living Christ. Their work transforms not only those they serve but themselves as well.

This Christmas, in this Jubilee Year, let us be inspired by their example. Let us examine our hearts and ask: Is there room? Can I welcome the stranger? Can I make space for those who are cold, hungry or alone? The Christ Child waits not only in nativity scenes but in the faces of those among us who have nowhere else to go. This is the true meaning

of Christmas - not in what we acquire or celebrate, but in the space we create for others in our hearts.

In the wake of the tragic shooting in Bondi on December 14, our hearts and prayers go out to the victims and their families as we reaffirm our commitment to mutual respect, dialogue and the work of peace.

In doing so may we know that God is good, good indeed.

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