

CROSSINGS

Christmas, 2013 | Vol. 112 | From the Crossings Community



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Chrissy

“Ya get some nice prezzies for Chrissy?”

Christine and I were picking out groceries in a Cairns grocery store when we overheard a bloke in the next aisle greet a sheila (woman) with those words. Being residents of a former Australian colony, we knew what the Aussie was asking. On the third day of Christmas, he was inquiring whether his friend had received some nice *presents* for *Christmas*.

I'm sure you regret, with me, that thoughts of Christmas are overwhelmed by a concern about presents. You are sorry that people use a holy day as a pretext to satisfy their own desires by the wishlist-regulated exchange of gifts. Shopping becomes a deviant devotion. You should have been with us back in the days in the remote Papua New Guinea highlands where Christmas meant no more than an extra worship service and a feast!

Well, let's get even. Let's co-opt the theme right back.

I want you to seek out some gifts you may have left under the tree in years past, and encourage you to take them out and open them and enjoy them. Get some good out of them! Hey! *Ya got some nice prezzies for Chrissy!*

Lo, text studies of the Christmas gospel from years past are available on the website of the Crossings Community, www.crossings.org.

(*Click* Text Study, *click* any year, *click* Nativity of Our Lord.) Since we first began posting text studies online, eleven different Luke 2 text studies (sometimes called Sabbathologies) have been offered. You might like to unwrap their studies for some help connecting the Christmas gospel with everyday life. If you will be in the pulpit, this might help you avoid giving people something they don't need. Or want.

Back in 1997 (for example), Ed Schroeder wrote about “Bringing God's Peace to Earth.” He was summarizing a crossing performed by Bob Bertram which was published in *Currents in Theology and Mission*.² Bob (channeled by Ed) inspected the pointed theological significance of the palpable darkness and fear in Bethlehem's fields that night, and helped us find a way from those cold fields, via a manged savior, to the salvation which the angels announce. Glory be! What happened back then reverberates as God still crosses into our world of sin to bring us out by means of his Son, who came to seek and to save the lost.

Take your pick:

- 1997 Ed Schroeder, “Bringing God's Peace to Earth”
- 1998 Mike Hoy, “Finding our Place”
- 2004 Jerry Burce, “Christmas Lights, or Shades of Glory”
- 2005 Bruce Martin, “The Manger: The Sign of Promise”
- 2006 Kris Wright, “God's Holiday Open House”
- 2007 Lori Cornell, “Cradled through the Cross”
- 2008 Robin Morgan, “In the midst of the ordinary”
- 2009 Bill White, “Is there room for Christ?”
- 2010 Bruce Martin, “Registered among Sinners”
- 2011 Paul Jaster, “Heavenly Peace”
- 2013 Lori Cornell, “The Love of a Child”

For every Sunday of every year, for several cycles of the lectionary, these writers and others have been offering you gifts of insight and analysis, bringing their theological acumen to bear on the all-important and joyful task of re-wording the gospel to make sure the healing gospel gets applied to our whole problem. Merry Christmas, all year long. Their theological and creative gifts are the sort Lewis Hyde wrote about so brilliantly in *The Gift*. (I cherish from that book the insight that in some cultures people become great by what they get; in others by what they give. I resist a temptation to reply to him, or to expound on the gentle viciousness of “*do ut des*,” I give to you so you will give to me.)

*Once did the skies before Thee bow;
A virgin's arms contain Thee now,
While angels who in Thee rejoice
Now listen for thine infant voice.*

(design by Richard Caemmerer)



Those who write our text studies receive no compensation for writing them. They only desire to share with you their own excitement about how the Word of God “pops” when you perceive that the true fire within it is the gospel—which is sometimes difficult to extricate from the law. So I thank them for their gifts to me, and hope you will also receive their gifts with thanksgiving.

And now, if you will be so kind as to accompany me, I want to take you to another part of the Commonwealth of Nations, where we see the poet Robert Burns filling out his wish list. What does he want from Santa, er “Some power”? He wishes (for all of us) that we might “see ourselves as ithers see us.” And by ithers he means others.

Why does he wish for this? Because he thinks that knowing what is wrong with us would spare us from many a foolish air and blunder.

Enjoy the poem by Burns, “To a Louse: On Seeing One on a Lady’s Bonnet, at Church.”



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Louse

To A Louse
On Seeing One On A Lady's Bonnet, At Church
1786

Ha! whaur ye gaun, ye crowlin ferlie?
Your impudence protects you sairly;
I canna say but ye strunt rarely,
Owre gauze and lace;
Tho', faith! I fear ye dine but sparely
On sic a place.

Ye ugly, creepin, blastit wonner,
Detested, shunn'd by saunt an' sinner,
How daur ye set your fit upon her-
Sae fine a lady?
Gae somewhere else and seek your dinner
On some poor body.

Swith! in some beggar's haffet squattle;
There ye may creep, and sprawl, and sprattle,
Wi' ither kindred, jumping cattle,
In shoals and nations;
Whaur horn nor bane ne'er daur unsettle
Your thick plantations.

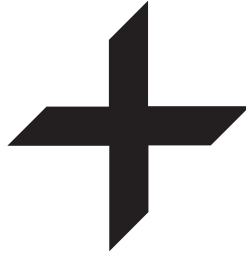
Now haud you there, ye're out o' sight,
Below the fatt'rels, snug and tight;
Na, faith ye yet! ye'll no be right,
Till ye've got on it-
The verra tapmost, tow'rin height
O' Miss' bonnet.

My sooth! right bauld ye set your nose out,
As plump an' grey as ony groset:
O for some rank, mercurial rozet,
Or fell, red smeddum,
I'd gie you sic a hearty dose o't,
Wad dress your droddum.

I wad na been surpris'd to spy
You on an auld wife's flainen toy;
Or aiblins some bit dubbie boy,
On's wyliecoat;
But Miss' fine Lunardi! fye!
How daur ye do't?

O Jeany, dinna toss your head,
An' set your beauties a' ahead!
Ye little ken what cursed speed
The blastie's makin:
Thae winks an' finger-ends, I dread,
Are notice takin.

**O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
An' ev'n devotion!**



*But yes, my Savior did bleed and my Sovereign died, devoted his sacred
head...to walk me over from the unholiness of hypocrisy, through
repentance and faith, to the land of the freed.*

It would indeed be jolly nice to receive that prezzy from some Power. Nobody hates hypocrisy more than Christians, right? Except maybe Jesus (see the Gospel of Matthew).

But seeing ourselves as others see us, even if we include God, is only half of what we need. If we receive that gift and only that gift, we will be left dead in our trespasses and sin. We need another and different gift, the gift which is ours in Christ, if we are to be saved not just from the louse, or the hypocrisy, or the poet in the pew behind us, but from the whole of God's law.

By Burns, we could be saved from many a blunder and much embarrassment if only we could see what is crawling up the back of our bonnet at the Christmas Eve service. I submit that we would probably just find a new and improved way of hiding the truth about ourselves. There is no limit to the hypocrisies of which we are capable. And they are not just a function of our religiosity. Burns doubtless staged his poem in church because hypocrisy seems so much worse when we pretend to hide our true selves from God. But no area of life and no relationship is immune to the problem of hypocrisy. Our native sense that we are "done" if we are "caught out" makes us keep our guard up, our bonnet on, everywhere we go, all the time. Even humility is sometimes a form of hypocrisy, isn't it? I mean,

humble behavior—which can be an affectation.

Yes, Robbie, people are hypocrites. We are *lousy* friends and care-givers and parents and children, etc. We do not see ourselves as *others* see us. Others, except for our mothers, are a lot more critical than we are of ourselves. So is Burns correct? Do we only need to have better eyes on ourselves?

If you know the pattern of our text studies, you are aware that merely knowing we are lousy does not save us. Lousy actions (external diagnosis) spring from lousy hearts (internal diagnosis), which means that, before God, we are lice (eternal diagnosis). (I am not nit-picking here.)

What if "some Power" was indeed diagnose us all the way down and tell us exactly how we look? And I mean not only *coram hominibus* ("as others—others—see us") but also *coram deo* (as God, the mother of all others, the *totaliter aliter*, sees us)? If we knew the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about all the "crowlin ferlies" creeping up our hairline, our hair would stand on end!

No, salvation does not come just from replacing hypocrisy with knowing ourselves. (But you didn't expect a guy whose last name is "Burns" to save your soul, did you?) Salvation comes from somewhere else.

I fancy that while Robert Burns, in 1786, was drafting this poem on the back of his bulletin instead of singing with the rest of the congregation, the woman with lice (Jeany) was singing a hymn penned by one of their countrymen, Isaac Watts, seventy-nine years earlier:

Alas! And did my Savior bleed
And did my Sovereign die?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a wretch as I?

The original text was "For such a worm as I." Worm as I? Louse as I? Whatever. You see where I'm going with this? You and I are not *wearing* the bonnet, we're *crawling* on it. But yes, my Savior did bleed and my Sovereign died, devoted his sacred head . . . for me. To walk me over from the unholiness of hypocrisy, through repentance and faith, to the land of the freed. There's even a kind of poetry about the parallelism, that Jesus devotes that "sacred head" for the hypocrite whose lousiness inspired the loathing contempt of the wise poet she made the mistake of sitting in front of. For, while the poem seems initially to be critically addressing the louse, it turns out in the end that it is the woman, not the louse, who is the fool. Who gets saved, not by knowing there is a louse (Eek!) on her bonnet, but knowing there is a Savior (Alas!) on the cross.

Speaking of lice, there is an effort these days to erase the stigma which once accompanied them. I found this online:



Lice, like many other pests, carry a social stigma. If you or your kids have lice, people may assume you are dirty or do not keep your home well maintained. These assumptions could not be further from the truth. Lice like to live in clean hair so they can lay their eggs in a comfortable environment.

I know what the stigma is. I remember the principal announcing to my eighth grade classroom that the next day he was going to be checking everyone's "headlights." At least, that was what I thought he said. My mom (my teacher) cleared it up after school. But I was certain that no head lice would be found in *my* head. I was right. Not in *our* house. Except, maybe that one time . . .

Notice how people get rid of stigmas. We hide the louse. We deny that lice are bad. At least, we have fewer than someone else. Or, "lice like to live in clean hair"—so take that!

I'll bet the Bethlehem shepherds shared combs. I mean, I'll bet they didn't. But I bet they had lice. And fleas. I'll bet they were cold. And tired. And unwelcome at better tables. But the stigmas of their poverty and abandonment ("Where is your God?" the nations jibed.) were not taken care of by better inspection, by denial, by comparison, or any other fiction. God saved them by sending his Son.

I am sorry I couldn't come up with something better to offer you at Christmas time than a poem about a louse written in a strange tongue. But coming way down is what Christmas is about—the Son of God emptying himself of all vanity and preciousness to lie in a manger, so that he might lift us up. If ye choose to see connections to Isaiah 53:3 and the Eucharist in stanza two of the poem, n' sich like, I'll nae stop

ye. For the giving which culminated on a despised cross was presaged in a despicable food trough some thirty years before. Nice prezzie, i' faith.

To God alone be the glory for this Gift of Gifts. Merry Christmas.

Marcus Felde

Please remember The Crossings Community with a gift this Christmas. An envelope is supplied. We hope to see many of you at the Crossings Conference in January, where more prezgies will be handed out! Not to mention that, for seminarians and first call pastors, the conference itself is free. Details online. There is still room in that inn.

Do Not Miss

Crossings 5th International Conference

One for All and All in One
Proclaiming "Christ Alone"
in an Age of Pluralism

Our Lady of the Snows Retreat Center
Belleville, Illinois

January 26-29, 2014

www.crossings.org/conference

Conference is
FREE
for all Seminarians
and
First-Call Pastors

(We thank Amy Kirchner of Amy Kirchner Design, Indianapolis, for the makeover of our newsletter.)

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