

Advent 3 – Reflection

New Prince, new pompe by Robert Southwell (1561-95)

Behold a silly tender babe
In freezing Winter night
In homely manger trembling lies
Alas a piteous sight.
The Inns are full, no man will yield
This little Pilgrim Bed;
But forc'd he is with silly beasts
In Crib to shroud his head.
Despise him not for lying there
First what he is enquire;
An orient pearl is often found
In depth of dirty mire.
Weigh not his Crib, his wooden dish,
Nor beasts that by him feed;
Weigh not his mother's poor attire.
Nor Joseph's simple weed.
The stable is a Prince's Court,
The Crib his chair of state,
The beasts are parcel of his pomp,
The wooden dish his plate.
The persons in that poor attire
His royal liveries wear;
The prince himself is come from heaven:
This pompe is prized there.
With joy approach, O Christian wight,
Do homage to thy King,
And highly prize this humble pomp
Which he from heaven doth bring.



**Adoration of the Shepherds
by Gerard van Honthorst (1622)**

This poem from the sixteenth century presents us with the nativity scene. It is a vivid image and we are invited to look closely – “Behold.” We are so used to seeing images like this; on Christmas cards, in stained-glass windows, in school nativity plays. But this poem reminds us that it is good to stop and look.

It is important to be aware that some of the words used in this poem have changed their meaning or emphasis since the sixteenth century. Both the baby and the beasts are described as “silly” which may seem to be a disparaging term according to today’s vocabulary. However, in this poem it means simple or innocent. The baby is also referred to as a Pilgrim which we usually associate with a spiritual search but Southwell would have just meant a traveller. Is Southwell implying that this baby has travelled from God to earth? He also uses the word “shroud” in referring to the crib – perhaps this is a deliberate reference to what is to come when Jesus’ body is placed in the tomb.

Our Christmas cards usually show a sanitised view of the stable and the conditions of Jesus’ birth. But in this poem Southwell emphasises the harsh reality. He tells us that we need to look beyond the

surface poverty of the scene to find “the pearl of great price.” We are challenged to understand who this baby is, and to think about what we value in our lives. It is not a stable but a princely court, the crib is a throne, the poor clothing of the people in the scene is really a uniform indicating that these people serve a king. This location and these people were chosen by God for this amazing moment in history. God chooses to be among the poor and harsh conditions of humanity.

In the final section of the poem, we are encouraged to approach with joy and give homage to the King. Paying homage means putting everything we have in the service of another, into the hands of one who is greater than we are. It is a big commitment, with great demands, but bringing great joy. In our pilgrimage through Advent we are reflecting on the idea of change in our lives. What change would such homage require of us?

Consider: Try to look with fresh eyes at images of the Nativity. What details do you notice? What does the scene say about God’s love for you?

Prayer:

Lord, our pilgrimage draws us nearer to your birth at Bethlehem. Help us to see your glory in the baby in the cradle and reflected in our lives.

Be our companion and our guide as we travel and light our way with your love and grace on our pilgrimage. Amen