

Earlier this week I went to buy a bottle of wine for a gift. I really don't know much about wine so it's always a bit of a challenge to guess from the outside what the wine in the bottle will taste like, especially if I want to buy something that costs more than my normal \$5 budget. As I was wondering around looking at wine labels, a man came up to me. He knew who I was and he's someone I've seen around town but I think it was our first conversation. He told me that he grew up in the Episcopal Church and shared his conviction that there is a benevolent being whom we might call God. But that's where things get sticky for him. Religion is the problem. Or perhaps I should say religions, and their claims to exclusivity.

Jim – that's not his real name – Jim was put off by the idea that you have to be a Christian to be ok with God. And he's not the only one. This is a conversation I have quite often. Like most people, Jim is very uncomfortable about religions which claim to have the true path. He sees them as divisive and potentially dangerous.

It is a huge issue for us today. We see Muslims who have literalized jihad proselytizing with guns; we hear people calling for only genuine Christians to be allowed into the country which harkens back to the Spanish Inquisition; and most of us know at least one person who thinks we're going to hell.

Yet tonight we celebrate the big bang of Christianity – the event which keeps on and on impacting our world – the birth of Jesus the Christ. However ambivalent we may be about the religious implications, there is something thrilling in the coming of God in the birth of a small child in a dirty stable in occupied Palestine...

And no one there was a Christian.

When the angels sang "Peace on earth, goodwill to all" they were not singing to Christians; those who heard them may have been Jewish but whether the shepherds were religiously observant Jews we will never know. The angels' greeting was not exclusive to one group of people, it was to all humanity.

Or was it? You may have noticed in tonight's Bible reading, the angels actually sing,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Which is a little problematic. Why only those whom he favors? And whom does he favor? All shepherds? All farmworkers? Or only Palestinian shepherds?

This is one of those places where the Bible gets a little fuzzy in translation. A more literal version of the Greek would be "Esteem in highest to God and on land peace in humans well-seeming."¹ So who are the well-seeming humans?

It's us. We are the humans that God finds delightful. There is no indication that the angelic choir is referring to only one bunch of humans but rather to ALL well-seeming, delightful humans – the ones that God loves – the ones whom God created and is pleased with. God chose to become human. Isn't that astonishing? Would I choose to go and live as a poor person in Palestine today? No I wouldn't.

¹ Greek Interlinear, <http://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/NTpdf/luk2.pdf>

Yet God did. And conditions back then were as bad, and probably a lot worse than they are now. And it wasn't the birthplace of Jesus back then. It was just Bethlehem, a small town in a country occupied by the Romans. Yet the amazing, awesome and all-Compassionate God chose to be born there as a human. To become one of us in the same way that we are conceived and born; to be brought up by human parents in a fairly normal human family, and to experience what it is to live in a human body with all its joys and pains and limitations. The limitless God chose to be limited.

And because we are limited to being in one time and place, so God had to incarnate at one time and in one place. And here we are two thousand years later, still trying to work out the implications.

And we don't always get them right. It is very human to want to belong to the best family, the best group, the best nation. We increase our security when we feel good about the people and ideals that we are engaged with. But when we feel that the ground is shifting uneasily beneath us, when we are afraid that the peace and civility that we are used to is being threatened by random acts of violence, then we want to circle the wagons even closer. We want to say that we're right and that in order to be OK you have to be like us, the well-seeming ones. In order for us to be the well-seeming ones then others must be wrong and potentially bad.

But that isn't the gospel. The gospel is that God became human and dwelled among us. The gospel is that Jesus the Christ died precisely because he opposed the restrictive and oppressive policies of the religious authorities. Jesus was not founding a religion – he was challenging the matrix of sin and violence which humans create even with the very best of intentions. He showed that there is another way; the way of peace and non-violence.

We saw an amazing example of people taking that other way this week. In Kenya, a bus with 100 passengers was on a journey into a dangerous area. It would usually have had a police escort, but the police car broke down so it went ahead without a guard. Al-Shabaab militants ambushed it. Brandishing guns, they ordered the Muslims to get out so that they could kill the Christians.

But they refused. The Muslim women gave Christian women their hijabs and helped others to hide. They told the militants, "If you want to kill us, then kill us. There are no Christians here." The militants killed one man who tried to escape but left the rest alone.

The Interior Cabinet Secretary of Kenya, whose name I will not try to pronounce, said "We are all Kenyans, we are not separated by religion."²

We are all well-seeming humans, we are not truly separated by false boundaries of religion or race. We are all beloved of God who chose to be born among us, Emmanuel - God with Us. The women on the bus in Kenya truly followed the teachings of Christ yet they do not identify as Christians. They understood that fear divides us and turns us against each other, but that love binds us together in solidarity against the very forces that Jesus came to expose as ultimately powerless.

In human terms their action was a huge risk and an example of great bravery. In the gospel's way of seeing things it was an act of the reign of God. The parable of the Good Samaritan writ large. This is what Christmas is about. The reality that God loves us, every last well-seeming one of us.

² <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/22/africa/kenya-bus-attack-al-shabaab-muslim-christians/>

God loves us enough to become human. And “with a love like that,” as the Beatles sang many years ago, “you know you should be glad.”

That is why we rejoice this evening. Not because we know we’re going to heaven because we’re good Christians. Not because Jesus is the only way to God, but because of God’s great and unconditional love, demonstrated in the birth of the God-child.

Because God loves each one of us and finds us well-seeming. And God loves those Muslim women in Kenya and God loves the Al-Shabaab militants just as much.

And we rejoice because in Jesus the Prince of Peace we have been shown another way. The way of non-violent, peaceful resistance. The kind of resistance that was shown by Rosa Parks, the kind that was shown by the Muslim people in Kenya this week.

“Peace on earth, goodwill to humans in whom God delights” will remain the words to a Christmas carol unless we have the courage to make them come true. And we can do it, we can do it because we know that God loves us, and so nothing can prevail against us.