

And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us; and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

St. John 1:14

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In the year 1247, a priory, or a monastery, was established in what was then just outside the walls of the City of London.

It was named for the mother of Jesus; so it was called St. Mary of Bethlehem, in honour of the place of our Lord's birth.

Appropriately, it was set aside to receive and to entertain the bishop and clergy of Bethlehem on any occasion when they might be visiting England.

But the Crusades were largely over by 1247, and visiting clergy from the Holy Land were not very common.

So, some time in the early 1300s, a hospital was attached to the priory; a hospital that, at first, was founded to provide for the medical needs of London's poor; but which, a few years later, was dedicated to the care of the mentally ill.

Over time and over many centuries the location of the Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem changed, but its role never did.

As we might imagine, the methods of medical attention were neither humane nor caring.

In effect, these poor souls were little better than chained animals¹; but even this inhumanity was small compared to the greater inhumanity that arose later when, in the eighteenth century, it became customary to allow visitors, upon the payment of a fee, to enter the hospital to observe the behaviour of the inmates.

Bored, fashionable, society tossing a coin or two so that they might be entertained by the deplorable conditions of the mentally ill.

Reality TV before TV.

Now, all that is sad enough; but there's one ironic point that I have not yet told you.

As can often happen over time, the pronunciation of St. Mary of Bethlehem was shortened.

Perhaps there were just too many syllables.

But for whatever reason, from early on it came to be called Bedlam: St. Mary of Bedlam.

Shakespeare used the word; as did William Tyndale,² the translator of the Bible; and Dickens later used it as well.

At first, of course, it was nothing more than a shortened form of Bethlehem: Bedlam; but in time it came to be used for anyone who was thought to be mentally ill: Jack or Tom O'Bedlam was a name for someone who was assumed to be insane.³

But even later still, by association with all of the noise and confusion of those sad, deplorable, hospital wards, stirred up by a continual stream of rich society visitors,

¹ In his diary for 1657, John Evelyn noted that in Bedlam he "saw several miserable creatures in chains."

² William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, 1528

³ Oxford English Dictionary "Bedlam"

the word bedlam came to mean any occasion of loud, bewildering, confusion. Hence the way in which we use the word bedlam today. Which ironic, of course, because it takes its name from the town where the Prince of Peace was born; not the Prince of Confusion or Chaos, but the Prince of Peace.

Now, anyone who has tried to finish their Christmas shopping on the afternoon of the 24th; or who has gone back to the stores as quickly as possible after Christmas in order to get the best bargains during the Boxing Week sales, will not find the image of Bedlam all that unusual for this time of year. I suspect that the word rightly describes what Costco or the Regent mall looked this past week.

But I suspect that the craziness and confusion of Christmas is not the part that we treasure the most. One look at a stack of Christmas cards, for example, will tell us that the parts of Christmas that we love the most are the times of quiet peacefulness, even if they're more imagined than real: a winter scene; a cottage in the woods; animals scurrying about; a fire blazing in the fireplace; a tree shining brightly; a star shining brilliantly; an adoring mother gazing softly on a new-born child. Images of quiet peaceful contemplation. And yet, as much as we treasure the quiet images, there is something in the image of bedlam that needs to be included in all that we do at this time of year. Not the bedlam of a shopping mall but the deeper bedlam of the Incarnation.

It seems to me that the idea that, in Jesus, God Himself enters into human life; the idea that in the birth of this child the Eternal sets Himself smack dab in the midst of time; ought to disturb our quiet contemplation; that it needs to cause a certain kind of bedlam in our thoughts and assumptions and values. We ought never to be casual about what it means to say that the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us; as John writes in this morning's Gospel. We ought never to be casual about what that says about God; and about what that says about us.

All of the familiar sights and sounds: the carols that we've sung more times than we can count; the lessons that we've heard since long before we can remember; the decorations that we faithfully put up in our homes every year; and the customs that we've enshrined in our hearts, should never lull us into a kind of quiet, comfortable, complacency.

We stand this morning on holy ground; and we watch with awe and wonder at the very idea that God has come to live and die as one of us.

Bedlam. The wonderful, confusing, disorienting, bewildering bedlam of the Incarnation. A kind of spiritual bedlam.

A call to leave our quiet rest on a hillside and rush to see a baby.

A call to leave behind all of the world's assumptions about what's most important, that we might kneel down before a newborn child in humble praise and adoration.

This is the Son of God.

If we can wrap our minds around that!

This is God in our own flesh. Born as one of us that we might ourselves always be God's daughters and son. This is holy ground.

O come, let us worship!

And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us...