

# Most Wanted

Luke 2:1-7

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent

12 December 2010

It's confession time this morning. Have you ever said anything about someone behind their back, that they were not meant to hear, but later it has come out? And you were extremely embarrassed. You have never done that, you say? Well, be honest because if you don't "fess up" it's going to come out sometime in one of the WikiLeaks revelations.

How would you like to be one of the American diplomats or even Hilary Clinton herself who has made candid comments about world leaders, never meant for public consumption, but now is being headlined in the media? And they have to face up to what they said in an indiscreet moment. That French President Sarkozy is thin-skinned and authoritarian. Or that Afghani President Karzai is a crook and his brother an even worse crook. Or that former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was a control freak and overly secretive. Or that Canada suffers from an inferiority complex and that the CBC is institutionally anti-American. Or that Russian President Dmitri Medvedev is just like Robin to Prime Minister Putin's Batman. Fancy having to meet your political counterparts at the next G8 or G20 summit when you have made snide comments like that behind their backs! Oh, to be a fly on the wall!

Also, I wonder what it would be like to be WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange, the Australian journalist and internet activist in the eye of this cyberstorm. He has been hailed as one of the world's most influential figures for championing the cause of freedom of information. He has received awards from Amnesty International, The Economist and The New Statesman for his investigative journalism and also from the Sam Adams foundation for integrity in intelligence.

It was, no doubt, ill-advised of Assange and WikiLeaks to release documents that put the lives of intelligence agents in jeopardy and handed terrorist organisations information useful to their murderous cause. But, this apart, the sum effect of what WikiLeaks has done might be a good one. To challenge governments to become more transparent. To make them more accountable to their electorates. And to be more responsible in their dealings with other countries on the world's stage.

Now, of course, for all his troubles, Assange finds himself on Interpol's Most Wanted list as he sits in a British jail being investigated for offenses unrelated to his whistle-blowing activities. Not only that he has become universally reviled – even Public Enemy No. #1 in the United States where senior politicians have called for him to be tried for treason and executed.

God forbid that any of us would ever have that experience of being loathed and detested on such a scale. What must it be like for those who have sinned grievously and now must bear the title of "disgraced" whenever they

are mentioned in the media. Tiger Woods the "disgraced" golfer. Marion Jones the "disgraced" athlete. Mel Gibson the "disgraced" actor.

There is a man in the age-old Christmas story, of course, who has long borne that dreadful title of "disgraced". And that is the inn-keeper who turned Mary and Joseph away from his hostelry when she was just about to give birth. This man has certainly been portrayed unfavourably down through the years, constantly receiving a bad press. "We picture him with a loud booming voice," says writer, Brett Blair, "arrogant, impatient and with big burly arms pushing the couple out into the cold streets, saying, 'Get out! We're full up! No room here. I can't be bothered with you and your problems. I have problems enough of my own.'" The writer goes on to say, "Preachers over the centuries have had a field day with this poor fellow. But was it his fault that the inn was built with twelve rooms instead of thirteen? Was it his fault that Caesar Augustus had issued a decree that the entire world should be taxed? Was it his fault that Mary and Joseph were so late in arriving?"<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, though the innkeeper has become one of the most reviled of all biblical characters, he is never actually mentioned in the Christmas story. He exists simply by implication. "And Mary brought forth her first-born son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, for there was no room in the inn."<sup>2</sup> From these last 5 words, we have constructed a character, imbued him with some of the most demeaning attributes imaginable, and condemned him to eternal human damnation for something we do not actually know he ever did.

Granted there probably was an inn-keeper. If there was an inn, then it is a fair assumption to make that there was also an inn-keeper. But that does not give us the right, "to perform a character assassination on an innkeeper, a man, a child of God we know nothing about."<sup>3</sup>

Oh, how we love to jump to conclusions! How we love to dive in feet first before we ever hear the whole story! How we revel in letting our imaginations run wild about what we think a person is like or what happened in a particular situation, before we ever take an objective look at the circumstances or the facts!

Two farmers met at the market. One said, "Hey, I know you. You're the guy who made a hundred thousand last year growing potatoes in PEI, aren't you?" The other was a little hesitant, "Well, not quite," he replied, "It wasn't PEI, it was Ontario. And it wasn't potatoes, it was corn. And it wasn't a hundred thousand dollar profit, it was a hundred thousand dollar loss. And it wasn't me, it was my brother! Other than that, you've got the story just about right!"

Of course, we laugh at the times we get the facts all screwed up. But consider the torment we cause when we judge others without knowing the whole truth. Consider the heartache we inflict when we let our imaginations run wild and circulate hurtful stories. Is such thinking not ultimately the root cause of many social evils? Where we jump to conclusions based on the colour of a person's skin, or their sexual orientation, or their age, or their gender, or their body shape rather than on the content of their character?

Maybe, this Christmas, as we consider the treatment of the innkeeper in the nativity story, we will commit ourselves, both personally and as a society, to becoming kinder and gentler towards others, especially by eschewing prejudice in all its forms and by resisting the temptation rush to unfair judgement about other people. And all in the true spirit of him who is the Prince of Peace.

Going back to the inn-keeper for a moment, perhaps we should begin to see him in a new light. Not on the Most Wanted list of the universally reviled but as one of the good guys.<sup>4</sup> After all, the innkeeper did not turn Mary and Joseph away completely but found them a place of warmth and seclusion, a place apart from the noise and busyness of the hotel. In a way, a much better place for a birth to take place.

One writer, Dr. Bill Bouknight, takes his hat off to the Bethlehem hotelier. "I want to applaud that Bethlehem innkeeper," he says, "Though he could not fulfil all the needs of the Holy Family, he did offer shelter."<sup>5</sup> Although he could not solve all the problems of that night, he did the best he could with the limited resources at his disposal.

Often we shy away from doing anything to help others because we complain that the problems are too big and too complex.

Helping the hungry? That's a political problem, a social problem, out of our league. But, though we can't solve all the problems, we can do something, we can make a start, by inviting the hungry of our community to our church at weekends and giving out food from our food bank.

Helping the bereaved? That's work for the skilled touch of a psychologist or counsellor, we may say, too involved for our limited skills. But, what about simply sitting down and listening to someone talk out their feelings. We can't solve all the problems of the bereaved, but we can do something to help them through a testing and trying time.

Bringing hope and peace to the world in which we live? Well, that's way beyond our level of expertise or influence as ordinary people. Maybe so. But we can sow the seeds of peace and hope, say, with a special Christmas donation to Presbyterian World Service and Development to alleviate suffering or build a better society in some far-off country.

Of course, we can't solve all of the world's problems. They are so vast. But, in so many different ways, we can place a small something in the hands of God – a small something that can be used powerfully in ways beyond our

imaginations, to bring succour and strength to those in need, in our families, among our friends, in our community, in our church and in our world.

So let's not revile the Bethlehem innkeeper this Christmas. Let's honour him. Let's give thanks for him. Most of all let us be inspired by a man who did not hide behind the excuse that he could not do all that he might have wanted to help Mary and Joseph, but did what he could, when he could, and with the limited resources at his disposal.

And if we follow the lead of the Innkeeper, maybe like him we too will hear a quiet whisper of a voice saying in our ear, "Well done good and faithful servant<sup>6</sup> ... Inasmuch as you did it for one of the least of these, you did it for me."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brett Blair, "No Room In The Inn" *ChristianGlobe.com* 2000

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:7

<sup>3</sup> James W. Moore, "Won't you let him into your heart?", *ChristianGlobe.com* 2002

<sup>4</sup> Prof. William Barclay comments that the Innkeeper was probably the best friend Mary and Joseph had in Bethlehem that night.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Bill Bouknight, "Is Someone Knocking?" *ChristianGlobe.com*, 2002

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 25:21

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 25:40