

## **Christmas at the Office Party**

**Luke2:8-20**

**Scott B. Martin – December 14, 2008**

Companies and businesses large and small tend to give Christmas office parties each year for their workers. It's a good tradition. It is a way of showing a little appreciation to the workers, both salaried and hourly, for the work they have done for the firm that year. Although I hear this year some companies are canceling the Christmas office party. They feel that it might be a bit unseemly what with hundreds of billions of dollars in bailouts being taken and hundreds of thousands of workers laid off in the last month alone. Perhaps they're right. One has to admit that this indeed has taken a bit of the Christmas spirit out of the season. What would it mean for the Christ of Christmas to visit not only our office parties but our workplaces? Would he be welcome there? What would he do? Would he fit in? Would he happily turn the water into wine that the celebration might continue or would he tip the money changers punch bowl over? I wonder.....

How strange that the angels should appear to the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night. The shepherds would have been just about the only people working that time of day. Even they had reached the doldrums of their shift, when the sheep were all bedded down for the night. All they had to do was make sure no wild beasts got at them. Still, they are on the job and working when the angels arrive with the amazing news that the Messiah had been born.

Today it would rather be like the angels appearing to some migrant farm workers working in a cabbage field and announcing that the messiah had

come; or perhaps given the time of day, to some factory workers on the graveyard shift, while they were on their break.

The angels could have appeared to some priests or to a rabbi working on their Sabbath service. They could have appeared to the scribes poring over their legal papers. They could have appeared to some pious soul who had gone to bed for the night after saying their prayers, but they didn't, they appeared to some lowly working stiff out on hills around Bethlehem. Other than Mary and Joseph they are the VERY FIRST to hear the good news that the messiah has been born!

This is a definite case of the "last being first." By some accounts shepherds were on the lowest rung of the totem pole. Some ancient texts suggest shepherds couldn't be trusted. Other ancient texts said they couldn't give testimony in court. Their word was no good. What a strange choice for the angels to make their announcement to. Truly, the last shall be first and the first last, The world will be topsy-turvy because of the birth of this child.

Luke sets the scene for the world being turned upside down by this babe in a manger. He begins chapter two by talking about Caesar Augustus. Now Augustus was the adopted son of the murdered Julius Caesar. He had become sole ruler of Roman after a protracted civil war in which he beat all his rivals. It was Augustus who turned the great Roman Republic into an empire, with himself as emperor. He had sign posts erected proclaiming himself as the bringer of justice and peace to the whole world. He officially declared this dead adoptive father to be a god and himself the son of god. It is in a far away corner of the empire that a babe is born in a manger, whose praises we still sing today.

N.T. Wright puts it this way, "*...the point Luke is making is clear. The birth of this little boy is the beginning of a confrontation between the*

*kingdom of God – in all its apparent weakness, insignificance and vulnerability – and the kingdoms of this world. Augustus never heard of Jesus of Nazareth. But within a century or so his successors in Rome had not only heard of him; they were taking steps to obliterate his followers. Within just over three centuries the Emperor himself became a Christian. When you see the manger on a card, or in church, don't stop at the crib. See what it's pointing to."*

Charles Dickens *Christmas Carol* is far more than fluffy holiday fare about an endearing cripple boy and his oppressed, milk toast father. Dickens wrote the *Christmas Carol* as an indictment of the evils of the industrial age in Great Britain. True it had brought great wealth to the country but it was also producing far too many Bob Cratchits and Tiny Tims. The debtor's prisons were overflowing and too many Scrooges refused to give their workers a raise and were perpetuating deplorable working conditions. In short, Dickens felt that the Spirit of Christ-mass was missing from the heart of society and was only being observed in certain homes, like that of Scrooge's nephew and the Cratchits.

The cure for Scrooge and for the wider society was for them to catch the vision of Christ-mass. This would bring true JOY not only to homes like that of Cratchits; it would heal family rifts like the one that existed between Scrooge and his nephew; and it would warm the heart of Scrooge himself, so he could enjoy his money and his life. By the end of *The Christmas Carol* everyone is experiencing JOY. All of the characters have become a joyous community. This does not mean everything is perfect. Tiny Tim is still a cripple. There is still a need for charity to help the poor. There are still debtor's prisons and work to be done. Nonetheless, the joyous community is

better able to face these things and perhaps even solve some of them than they were before.

The message of Charles Dickens *Christmas Carol* seems particularly apt in the midst of this major economic downturn today. Greed at all levels has damaged and destroyed strong companies and in the process is hurting millions of people all around the world today.

In the last several weeks we learned of Republic Windows and Doors shut it's plant down in Illinois and gave an estimated 300 workers only three days notice, instead of the required 60 days. No severance pay was given and health insurance was canceled. Some workers were even owed back pay. Republic Windows and Doors said they had to shut down because Bank of America would not extend them their usual line of credit in the midst of the economic downturn that is hitting the housing industry particularly hard. This is the same Bank of America that was given some \$25,000,000,000 as part of the recent bailout plan, money given to help credit to begin flowing again.

There is probably plenty of blame to go around. I understand that while Republic Windows and Doors is closing its union plant in Illinois it is opening a nonunion plant in Iowa, where they can pay their workers less. Workers in Illinois occupied the plant until a resolution was reached. Because of this action some justice has been achieved for the workers.

Let me suggest that the bottom line of business is NOT money. True, businesses need to make a profit or at least break even over the long haul, but money is not the ultimate bottom line. Business, the whole economy in general, has the ultimate purpose of providing a decent living for the whole human community, while protecting the environment for future generations. If a business or national economy cannot do that, it won't matter how much

money it makes. For business owners and investors it is a case of “Doing well by doing good.”

Here’s the story of another business. Broetje Orchards is not a tiny mom and pop business. Today it own 5,500 acres, has a 1.1 million square foot warehouse and ships 5.5 million boxes of fruit under the brand name “First Fruits.”

It didn’t start that way. The Broetje’s bought a small cherry orchard when they were 22. They knew nothing about farming. That first year their crop froze. The second year rain ruined the crop. The third year fruit flies destroyed the crop. The man from whom they bought the farm gave them leeway on their payments. Ralph Broetje says of him, “He was a real committed Christian. He had more faith in me than I did in myself.”

Today First Fruits is a thriving business, albeit a rather atypical one. The Broetje’s give away 75% of their profits. When they ad technology, they make sure that no jobs are lost and if possible jobs are added. The Broetje’s work side by side with their employees. They hire from within. They built and subsidize a day care for their workers. They built rental housing with below market rent for their workers and now they are building a housing development that will allow workers to purchase their first home. They built a chapel in the heart of their housing area and before workers go to work in the fields at 6 a.m. the supervisors and often the Boetje’s themselves pray together.

In 2006 70% of the crop was destroyed by hail. They had insurance and that would have allowed them a easy profit. They didn’t know if they could even break even on the 30% of the crop that remained. What they did know was that several hundred of their year round workers would lose their jobs if they took the insurance money, because if they took the insurance money

they couldn't harvest any of the crop. It was difficult choice financially but not morally. They passed on the insurance money, harvested the remaining 30% of the crop and managed to break even.

What is behind all of this? When Ralph Broetje was 15 he attended a weekend retreat that focused on missions. "I had the wild idea that I would have an apple orchard that would help feed the kids in India." Now that idea laid dormant for years but his wife Cheryl says, "as we reflect back on that time, we believe that was God calling at 15."

Doing well by doing good, creating the joyous community. I bet First Fruits has one awesome Christmas party! We can too, if we invite God to our office party, to our business and economic decisions and let the party begin! Amen.