

## Christmas Eve

In this room the cathedral parish usually feeds the hungry and homeless of downtown Kansas City. When I arrived here as pastor three years ago, I had already heard about Morning Glory Ministries, but I was more familiar with another social service agency in Kansas City, the Bishop Sullivan Center. My brother Tom has been the director there for over 25 years.

Tom told me recently that the pandemic has helped people understand better what it's like to be poor. The virus has cast a cloud of vulnerability over the entire human race. We cannot depend on the stability of our health. We cannot rely on our jobs. We cannot travel. We can't go to professional sporting events, concerts or theater. We can't eat at restaurants. But now the vaccines have come. We have a reasonable hope that our life will improve in 2021.

Nonetheless, my brother points out, the cloud of vulnerability over the poor never completely lifts. They can never depend on stable health. They never know if they will hold a job. They never travel. They never go to professional sporting events, concerts or theater. They never eat at restaurants. A vaccine will help, but it will not remove the vulnerability of the poor.

As St. Luke narrates the birth of Jesus, the cloud of vulnerability hangs low over the Holy Family. Joseph and a very pregnant Mary traveled from their home because of some political decree. They arrived in Bethlehem homeless at the moment Mary needed to deliver her child. She laid the newborn in an animal's feeding trough because no inn could provide a bed. If this room, Donnelly Hall, had been in Bethlehem that first Christmas Day, the Holy Family probably would have stood in line here to get some food.

Even the animals that day had to wait their turn. Luke does not tell us which animals ate from that manger. Isaiah says, "The ox knows its owner and the donkey knows the manger of its Lord—but people do not recognize God." When we set an ox and donkey in our mangers at home, we undo Isaiah's rebuke.

Bethlehem means House of Bread. It appropriately became the birthplace of the one who would call himself the Bread of Life. Many artists therefore depict the manger lined not with straw but with wheat. On Christmas Day, in the place where animals ate, lay the one who became our food. The word that Luke used for the inn is the same one he used for the lodging where Jesus and his disciples would eat the Last Supper. At his infancy there was no place for him, but there was before his death. As at the beginning of his life he lay in a feeding trough near an inn, so at the end of his life he reclined at table in a different inn. The Body of Christ that first lay in a manger now lies upon our altars.

Our gathering in Donnelly Hall today lacks the splendor of the cathedral, but it captures the essence of Christmas. We have entered this refuge because there is no room in the other one. We will better understand the plight of the homeless and the hungry. The difference, of course, is that we will go back to our homes and back to our beds; they will not. Still, we have come here to proclaim that the Bread of Life is among us. The cloud of vulnerability that once covered the soul of the entire human race has lifted forever from the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, because of one homeless family on the first Christmas Day.