

No Room at the Inn

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"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.... And Joseph went up from Galilee...to Judea, to the city of David...with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." We all know this story from the Book of Luke. It will be told in word and pageant around the world in church, cathedral and home these next two weeks as we approach the 25th of December. And it is fitting that we do so. For this tale of a man and women on the road, the birth of their child in a stable because there was no place for them, no room, no roof, no welcome to hearth, home or inn stands not only at the fountain head of a world religion, but is and has been a reality lived by many. So many, ill-housed and homeless. So many, one untimely illness, one paycheck, one domestic conflict, one bloody occupation by an imperial power away from the streets, the open sky, the tent in the snow, the refugee camp.

The story of no room in the inn is a classic, a simple, vivid narrative from the storehouse of our common human experience. We turn to it, as we do other classics of ancient history and myth, because, as Cicero stated two thousand years ago—in words I shared with you in the meditation—we turn to it because "not knowing what happened before you were born means being a child forever." And if we are to grow into the full rich measure of adulthood, to its pains and pleasures, then surely our experience as human beings must be interwoven with the life and stories of our ancestors. Lives we access through memory and the retelling of their stories, hardships, adventures and achievements.

I don't know for sure what we think when we gather at Christmastime to celebrate the memory of a child's birth in Judea so long ago. Surely, for many it is to commemorate the miraculous event of the incarnation of the divine in the frail human vessel of an infant. It is nearly enough, whether we believe the myth of incarnation or not, to signal our awe before the illimitable possibilities of a human life symbolised by birth. But my attention this day is drawn to the fact that this story is set in a context of the search for something as universal and conventional as hospitality and shelter. They found no room in the inn and were forced to find shelter from the elements, and a place to deliver a child into this world by taking refuge in a barn along with other beasts of burden. That is what stands out clearly in my mind's eye this third Advent Sunday. And laid him in a manger for there was no room for them in the inn.

The birth of Jesus of Nazareth in a barn is an archetype of the desperate, millennia-long human search for shelter. For the stability, security, and dignity conferred by housing sufficient to give us refuge from the prying eyes of others and to shelter us from the soul-destroying, body grinding indignities that befall us when left out in the streets, left vulnerable to the heartless whims of the market, left unprotected under merciless skies.

Today as we self-consciously remember and share this classic story of parents, a pitiless night, a barn, and an infant, let us enable it to work on us, to carry us from childhood to maturity by recognising the historical, cultural and material imperatives of our own times. Imperatives that drive us to return again and again to the past in order to see ourselves as we are...or as we would like to be.

Who are we? Who would we like to be? Do we think, when we read that verse from the Gospel of Luke, "and laid him in a manger for there was no room for them in the inn," that we as individuals or as a

collective: a city, a province, a nation, that we would have welcomed and offered adequate, decent shelter and assistance to that desperate, unknown, needy couple that knocked on our door on a winter's night? And even if we did, as individuals, a city, a province, a nation, even if we did give them shelter for the night, do we send them packing the next day?

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Fifty-six years ago, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose principal author, John Peter Humphrey, was a Canadian legal scholar, arose from the rubble and catastrophe of world war and genocide. This Declaration and the subsequent conventions and institutions of an international human rights culture are now woven into the fabric of the community of nations and peoples. We commemorated the anniversary of this Declaration one-year ago in this place, and we do so today.

I want to recall some of the words of this recent "classic" text, informed by the history, myths, constitutions, and experiences of the human family so ably collected and used by Professor Humphrey in creating the Universal Declaration... "Whereas," the preamble begins, "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation for freedom, justice and peace in the world." Therefore, the Declaration asserts: "everyone has the right to those economic, social, and cultural rights indispensable for the dignity and free development of the human person." And if there was any question about what those rights are, the Declaration goes on to enumerate them in detail. I am going to skip down to Article 25, which is central to our story today. It states: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of [the individual] and his/[her] family, including food, clothing, housing..., medical care and necessary social services."

The intent of the Declaration was 1) to identify and then assert that there are indeed universal human rights, 2) to set a "common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations," and 3) to "secure their universal and effective recognition and observance." This nation was among the first signatories of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And governments and the people of Canada, at least as I see it, have been unusually aware of and responsive to the Declaration's call to "secure...effective recognition and observance" of rights enumerated in the document. In 1976, the government signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, a legally binding treaty, committing this nation to make real progress on fully realising the economic, social and cultural rights of its people, including the right to adequate housing. And to the credit of this nation, its governments, from 1953 to 1993, worked to create and maintain publicly funded social housing through coops, non-profits, urban native housing, and public housing projects and rent supplement programs. The federal government had a national strategy of jointly funded housing programs with the provinces through a cost sharing formula of two-thirds federal and one-third provincial dollars.

And then this nation faced a debilitating deficit crisis. As a result, in 1993, the Liberal Party's new Finance Minister targeted the funding of a wide range of Canada's social programming commitments for cost reduction and elimination, including this nation's social housing programmes. From 1993 to 2001, no federal money to build new social housing was provided, "even after the deficit was eliminated in 1997." As a result, Canada now has the dubious distinction of being the only member nation of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development without an on-going national housing program—even though we are a signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. (John Irwin, "Home Insecurity: The State of Social Housing Funding in BC," Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2004, 7. Hereafter cited as Irwin.)

With the deficit eliminated, and no plan to resume funding for social housing construction, the United

Nations Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights critically observed in December 1998, "The Committee is gravely concerned that such a wealthy country as Canada has allowed the problem of homelessness and inadequate housing to grow to such proportions that the mayors of Canada's 10 largest cities have now declared homelessness a national disaster." As a consequence the Committee is sued specific recommendations that the federal government implement a national social housing strategy to address both inadequate housing and homelessness with all due speed. (Quoted from House of Commons, Bill C-509, Libby Davies, MP, "An Act to provide for secure, adequate, accessible, and affordable housing for Canadians," 2.)

Unfortunately, neither federal nor provincial governments seem to recognise, in spite of Declarations and Covenants signed and national disasters unfolding in our cities and towns, that housing is a universal human right, and a "key determinant...of physical, psychological, and social well-being essential for a healthy life." (Irwin, 6) Instead, their approach is that it is a "commodity...bought and sold in a market system." A system that unfortunately "fails to meet the housing demand of those who cannot afford the market rate. As a result, more than a million Canadians are in housing need, and there are an estimated 200,000 homeless people in this country." (Irwin, 7)

Now when the federal government, in 1993, eliminated new social housing construction funds and scaled back funding for on-going housing and rent supplement needs, the provincial governments of British Columbia and Quebec did a courageous, decent thing. With their limited means, they made a commitment to fund new social housing construction as best they could. And between 1994 and 2003, our provincial governments helped to provide 13, 000 new social housing units. (Irwin, 9) There are currently over 40,000 such units scattered throughout the Province.

So far so good, no? Unfortunately, there are two problems, which combined are leading us down the road to a human disaster. The first is that even with the additions to social housing stock in British Columbia, demand far exceeds supply. There is a waiting list of over 10, 000 applicants in this province for affordable housing. 65, 000 households in BC are in deep core housing distress, due to low wages, uncertain employment, and a host of social and cultural factors, with the result that these individuals and families are spending far more than 50% of their income on rent. With adequate social housing stock unavailable to relieve the pressure, the market price of housing—for both mortgages and rent—are driven up, as we well know.

So the first problem is not enough decent, affordable housing. Increasingly, there's no room in the inn, and too many of our fellow residents are being forced out into the street or gouged financially in order to find inadequate shelter in "mangers" throughout this Province.

If that's the first problem creating a human rights disaster, the second is the ideology and programmes of our governments. Let me repeat, unfortunately, in Canada housing is not recognised by our governments as a universal human right. In their eyes, it is a commodity to be bought and sold in the market regardless of the toll on human lives and well being. Let me give two examples close to home: rent increases and social housing cuts. Rents. With market prices for housing and rents going up dramatically, with vacancy rates for apartments dangerously low, when working families are receiving little or no pay increases or when they're having their wages rolled back, what does the provincial government do? Pass landlord relief legislation. A Residential Tenancy Act, enacted in 2004 allowed landlords to increase rents by 4.6% this year, and 2% plus inflation each and every following year. Hapless renters who aren't seeing these kind of raises in their wages can only go to arbitration if they can prove that the increase is greater than the inflation plus 2% figure. Have you got the time from work and the research skills to prove that? And property owners can raise rents to whatever rate they think the market can bear after the poor tenant moves out. At this rate, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Vancouver will rise from \$759 currently to over \$1000 by 2010. Rents will put

“greater pressure on low-income earners and drive up the demand... for affordable housing.” (Irwin, 10-11)

Unfortunately, this is happening at exactly the same time that the supply of new affordable social housing is being cut off by the provincial government, an ideologically addled group intent, as well, in privatising what's left of the province's publicly owned housing stock. Remember the federal government and the UN critique? Well, in December 2001, Ottawa offered a maple leaf to the provinces to cover its lack of social housing policy. BC received a one-time, \$89 million capital funding grant for new social housing to be matched by the provincial government. Here in BC, the provincial government took the money even though it had already announced that after April 1, 2005, no new social housing for those in economic need will be built under the Provincial Housing Program. It's going to be left up to cities and towns to fend for themselves, or left to the benefaction of enlightened real estate developers and property owners. Good luck! So, the government in Victoria took the federal dollars for new social housing and is now diverting it into the provincial health care system to pay for construction of new assisted living units for seniors and people with disabilities.

Don't misunderstand. Funding assisted living is an essential part of our health care system. But is it appropriate for our government to meet its health care obligations by abandoning the construction of new social housing for those living in poverty and housing distress? The “provincial and federal governments should address the need for a continuum of care that includes home care, assisted living, and long-term care for seniors and the disabled—but not at the expense of new social housing.” (Irwin, 4) Our Provincial government should not abandon our collective responsibility of providing a room in the inn, of new social housing especially at a time when the demand and need for it is so acute.

“To maintain levels of affordable housing that keep pace with rising [need], ... [our] governments need to reinvest in ongoing, sustainably funded, affordable housing programs. Housing should be treated as a fundamental right in Canada.” We should have a “comprehensive federal-provincial housing policy and action plan,” and thus end the stigma of living in an affluent nation that has had no social housing programme for over a decade. (Irwin, 14)

“Steven,” you may say, “come on, this is Christmas. Give it a rest.” But I can think of nothing more germane to this whole season than the question, the right to affordable, adequate housing. Even if it were a myth, I cannot help thinking about that couple, that pregnant woman, on the road, looking for shelter, for a safe, welcoming place to give birth and to bring an infant into this world. Because that's what classics do, ancient history, our mythic past. We look around us...at what drives us...moves us...propels us toward self-knowledge, toward healing within and mending the world...at answering the question: “who are we and what do we want to become?” May we find something of ourselves this season in those classics: Maccabees reclaiming their home, solstice revelers trying to stay warm in front of the blazing Yule, and that couple on a December night looking for a room in the inn.