



## Things to Ponder

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### He Shall Be Peace

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By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

If there were a AAA guide book in Jesus' time, Bethlehem would rate only a passing mention: "a small town, located six miles south of Jerusalem, a market for sheep, visited primarily by tourists on the way to Jerusalem to offer animal sacrifices, not worth a detour to see it." Such a description would have overlooked the historical significance of that otherwise "hick" town. It was there that Jacob had buried Rachel. It was there that Ruth had lived when she married Boaz. Above all, Bethlehem was known as the City of David, for it was there that the future king of Israel was born and kept sheep, and it was there that the long-awaited Son of David, the Messiah, the Prince of Peace was to be born.

In today's first reading the prophet Micah sums up the significance of Bethlehem. In comparison with other cities in Israel, Bethlehem was considered so unimportant that he describes it as "too small to be numbered among the clans of Judah." Yet, it will be the birthplace of the Messiah, "the ruler in Israel whose origin is from of old, and whose greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth ... and he shall be peace."

Christ was born in one of those rare moments when the Roman Empire was at peace. Christmas carols such as "Silent Night" and "O Little Town of Bethlehem," reflect the peace that would emanate from this little town and envelop the entire world. But the sad truth is that the history of this little town has not been a synonym for peace.

The Crusades of the Middle Ages attempted to recapture sites in the Holy Land that had been taken over by followers of Islam, and Bethlehem was the biggest prize of all. The Crusaders, for all their good intentions, probably killed far more Christian Arabs in Bethlehem than they did Muslims. The Crusades were unsuccessful in their attempt to recapture the Holy Land, and since then Bethlehem has been a scene of war and chaos.

Singing "O Little Town of Bethlehem" cannot cover up the memories of video footage of the escalating tensions between Arabs and Israelis that the world witnessed many years ago when Israeli soldiers entered Arab houses of worship searching for Palestinian militants. This incursion prompted a group of militants to entrench themselves in the Church of the Nativity. Weeks of bloodshed and anxious negotiations followed until the situation returned to its previous level of manageable

tension.

If Christ is indeed the Prince of Peace, we must all pray that the peace, for which all the world so desperately longs, may emanate from the land in which Jesus was born, and that continued negotiations may lead to much deeper reconciliation between clashing cultures, religions and political priorities. Pope Benedict XVI urged us to “pray in a special way for the birthplace of our Redeemer and for the men and women who live and suffer there: ‘Look O Lord, upon this corner of the earth, your homeland, which is so very dear to you! Let your light shine upon it! Let us know peace!’ ”

A fourth significance of Bethlehem is that it is translated into English as “House of Bread”—a bakery no less! But oh, what special bread that shepherd would bake—His own body and blood, His whole and entire self, disguised, as it were, in something so seemingly small and insignificant as a wafer.

May each of us this Christmas be able to see our home as a “House of Bread,” filled with the real presence of Christ, and experience the peace that He is, a peace that will spread from our “Bethlehem” to our community and to our world.

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