What Child Is This?

In the movie *Talladega Nights* with Will Ferrell there is a hilarious scene where Ferrell’s character, celebrity car racer Ricky Bobby, offers grace before his family’s extravagantly low-class meal of fast food. Ricky addresses his prayer of thanking explicitly and exclusively to “the Baby Jesus,” thanking Baby Jesus for all Ricky’s millions in prize money and endorsements, for his family’s fine things and even for his “hot” wife. When his persistent addresses to Baby Jesus are criticized as “off-puttin’” by his wife, Ricky angrily insists he “likes the baby version the best!” After this outburst, Ricky continues his prayer to the “8 pound, 6 ounce Savior who is too tiny to utter even a single word.”

We may chuckle at this ridiculous scene, but Ricky Bobby is not so unlike our society as a whole, which also has an affinity for the non-confrontational, baby version of Jesus. Have you ever noticed that even people who aren’t very religious during the rest of the year love to celebrate Christmas? Perhaps this is because the baby version of Jesus seems the safest. Too small to utter judgment against us for our sinfulness, this sweet little Jesus seems more likeable than his adult version. The baby Jesus just lies there in his manger, cooing gently and receiving the adoration of shepherds and wise men.

However, Christmas isn’t supposed to trivialize or sugar-coat our image of God Incarnate. Rather, if we celebrate Christmas as integrally connected to the season of Advent, we can recognize better, when He comes, the One for whom we have waited in joyful hope. Advent teaches us to yearn for the coming of Christ not only in flesh as a child born to a humble couple in first-century Galilee, but also for the coming of the Lord of hosts: Christ, the ruler of all lands, nations and peoples, who will come in glory at the end of time. This Christ of ultimate power and glory is the same person as this tiny, helpless infant in a manger.

How can this be? Our human minds struggle to reconcile these mysteriously contradictory images of the Savior. It is a stumbling block to us. And yet mystery is at the heart of this truth: the one who comes in glory comes also in humility; in power yes, but also in weakness and vulnerability. The one who is king is also a child. Though he was nursed at his mother’s breast, he himself is sacrificial food for us, and for all the world (it is easy to overlook that when the baby Jesus lies in a manger, he literally lies in a food-trough for animals).

And although God-in-Christ is born at Christmas to live with us in friendship, he is also born to die. As composer Francis Patrick O’Brien writes, the wood of the cradle is also the wood of the cross. Holly is a fitting decoration for the Christmas season because it was traditionally thought to be the tree from which Christ’s cross was hewn. (Harry Potter fans will be interested to learn that JK Rowling gave her hero a wand made of wood from the holly tree, hinting that Harry would be a Christ-figure in the story.) When the wise men approach to adore their child King, they bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh: gold for a king, frankincense for a high priest, and myrrh for a balm to anoint his body in death. The Holy Family accepts these gifts on Jesus’ behalf, knowing he must fulfill all three expectations as the Christ.

The infant Jesus is not silent at Christmas, like the mute, cuddly babe our society prefers. But what does this infant Savior, this tiny King, speak to us at Christmas, through the din of celebration and the festive indulgences of the season? What can a tiny baby possibly say? Peace. Ever so simply and gently, he speaks peace to us and to our world. It is an unlikely message in a world fraught with violence and instability, in Mary and Joseph’s time as in ours. But still he speaks peace amidst the chaos, peace in the face of seeming contradiction, peace with one another, with ourselves, and with our own mortality. He comes to bear our burden with us, making it light. Peace is what Christ brings in this time between the paradise of the beginning and the glory of the end. And so a light shines in the land of gloom, and we who walked in darkness now see a great light, for today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord! Merry Christmas to all!

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