



Do you remember Annie Dillard —*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*? Her journey through organized religion began in childhood with the Presbyterian Church, in later life she moved into Roman Catholicism, and now apparently is one of the “none of the aboves.”

One time Annie had a desire and opportunity to visit Bethlehem and the exact place where tradition says Mary gave birth to Jesus. She didn't like it much. She found a huge ornate church with many

oil lamps, competing Christian clergy, throngs of pilgrims with smoky candles. Far down below street level was a narrow cave. Like everyone else she knelt down and stretched her hand out to touch the 14 point silver star surrounding a circular hole. *“That was the bull’s-eye...”* However, for Annie, *“Any patch of ground anywhere smacks more of God’s presence on earth, to me, than did this marble grotto.”*

A number of biblical scholars believe that we should look upon the nativity narratives as metaphors rather than literal historical fact. Now some archaeologists are also beginning to question Bethlehem in Judea as the birthplace. Some of them suggest a suburb of Nazareth as a much more likely place. If we look on the traditional narratives: being born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David, links Jesus to the house of David; having the shepherds be the first to hear of the birth demonstrates that the good news is especially for the poor and those living on the margin of society — and so it goes.

Those thoughts were running through my mind when I was once having lunch in an outdoor snack bar in Nazareth. Arab kids, clutching a soccer ball, were on their way to a nearby pitch. At another table a group of young Jewish mothers were clutching their infants and, I assumed, sharing the secrets of parenthood. No candles, no oil lamps, no silver stars — but there was at least one pilgrim. I can see Jesus playing here and Mary at that table of mothers.

A few nights from now I will join others in the chapel at Starcross to celebrate some glimmerings of the sacred in our lives. To me Jesus is very real as a brother who led us on a way out of the troubles that human life can produce.

When we finish our Christmas Eve service we will step out under the stars and know that we are on a *“patch of ground which smacks of God’s presence on earth.”* You can say the same no matter where you are on this planet. I just know from past experience that all those “patches of ground” somehow merge for an instant. Perhaps it was such a night in 1847 when the French wine merchant Placide Cappeau de Roquemaure was inspired to write *“O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining”* It can be a holy night for each of us — no matter what the troubles, what the doubts.

In this stillness long ago there was a very special birth that blessed all the births that followed. On Christmas Eve we celebrate the night when Jesus was born. We celebrate a birth, a new beginning, a hope. We remember in a special way the 380,000 babies who will be born on that night. And, the 150,000 of us who will end our journeys on that night.

Blessed be this Christmas moment for us all, for all those we love, and all the beings who are and have been and will be on earth.

“O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining”

Brother Toby