

## Eleven P.M. Christmas Eve 2009

### *Christmas Cakes*

Luke 2: 1-7

#### **TOD:**

Pray with me: This Christmas Eve, may we receive the spirit of Christmas through song, silence, scripture, communion and word. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

The smells of Christmas, what comes to your minds?

When I smell molasses and ginger I close my eyes and I can see my mum up to her elbows in flour on a December's day in northern Virginia, where I grew up, baking Christmas cookies.

Or, when I smell apple cider and cinnamon I close my eyes and I can picture pregnant Ana, twenty-five years ago in a Christmas shop in southern California as we expect our first child.

Christmas Eve, of all the evenings of the year, begs for a story to be told: Charles Dickens tells *A Christmas Carol*, or Dylan Thomas tells *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, or Henry Livingston tells in verse *The Night Before Christmas*.

Fred Craddock tells this Christmas tale:

#### **ANA:**

“What gift would you like for Christmas?”

“We are Jews!” the people respond. “We do not celebrate Christmas.”

But their response does not faze Oswald Goulter, the man who asks the question. He tries again, “I understand you are Jews. But if you could have anything at this time of year what would it be?”

The cluster of Jews, pause to give thought to Goulter's question... If they could have anything... what would it be? *Pause...*

Extraordinary circumstances surround this story. Oswald Goulter, missionary for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the denomination that ordained me, Goulter was assigned to China in the late 1920's. Now he has just been freed from being held by the Communists for three years under house arrest. The year... 1950. The Chinese release Goulter with the condition that he leaves China and returns to the United States.

Unable to access funds, Goulter communicates with the Disciples of Christ's mission board, now our own Global Ministries Board. The church wires him money from the USA. The Chinese authorities instruct Goulter to leave on the first available ship. That mid-December, the first available ship is a tramp steamer heading to Madras, India. Goulter boards and leaves China.

Once in India, Goulter searches for a second ship on which to continue his journey. During the days of waiting to depart, Goulter learns of a large group of white people living in poor community on the outskirts of Madras. They live --shelter, really-- in some empty barn lofts.

"Who are these people?" Goulter wonders. He discovers they are Jews. They fled Germany before the war and holocaust. But country after country denied them asylum, saying, "We are full-up with Jews. You are not welcome here. Go away." These Jewish refugees finally find sanctuary in the barns of some lower caste, Madras Indians.

Goulter says to these displaced Jewish refugees, "You have been away from all that is familiar for a very long time," as he himself has been. He continues, "All this time, what have you missed? It is Christmas, what would you like?"

"Really," say the refugees, "we are Jewish. We do not observe Christmas. Buutt, at this time of year, December, what we really miss...the smells... and the tastes of all those wonderful pastries we could buy back home."

Enough said. Goulter searches Madras. His efforts pay off when he finds a little, European bakery. With the money remaining for his ticket home, he buys pastry for the *entire* community of Jewish refugees to enjoy. *They are overwhelmed* by his thoughtfulness and generosity. ...Sheepishly, Goulter cables the mission board and explains that he needs more money.

**TOD:**

Fred Craddock, the teller of this Christmas tale, says, “I heard Goulter tell this story to my divinity school class years and years ago. One of my seminarian classmates indignantly asks Goulter, “Why did you spend all that money on those Jews? They do not celebrate Christmas. They do not *even believe* in Jesus?”

“But I do!” Goulter replies with an innocence that I can only marvel at. “I believe in Jesus,” says Goulter, “It was Christmas! With the smells of those wonderful Christmas cakes and breads, in the breaking of those delicious pastries with that forsaken community of Jewish refugees, I had the sweetest Christmas communion ever with my Lord and with the least of all his children.” *Pause...*

**ANA:**

Let us pray. Christmas: the smells, the sounds, the songs, the silence, the Communion-- the bread and the wine--, You, O God, come to us and are made known to us, again and again, and again. Help us recognize you in the baby born poor and in the manger—the barn. Help us recognize you in the refugees. Help us recognize you in the homeless on our streets. Help us recognize you in our neighbours, our families, our friends and our foes.

On this silent night, Holy Night, deliver to us your calm, shed upon us your light, grant us your heavenly peace in our hearts, minds, and spirits this Christmas Day and always. Amen.