

**Sometimes**, reality is stranger than it looks. We may see it and live it, but it may appear so disconnected to our senses and being. We are in disbelief, especially when we suffer a tragedy or a natural disaster. This sort does not happen to us frequently, but when it does, we do not tend to cope with it very well.

Terrorism is another good example. People are paralyzed by it at first, and they follow it with a rash reaction. People are gripped with fear, primarily, and it takes a while, before they can overcome the panic, and rationally respond to the situation.

**If** reality can be strange, truth is sometimes even stranger than reality, even though we live through it, feel it, taste it, and smell it. One good example is the Christmas display of crèche.

We are so used to seeing the arrangement of crèche: The holy parents, the infant child lying in the manger, surrounded by shepherds and animals in the

small hut. Sometimes, we see the three wise men worshipping the infant Jesus in the manger, the night he was born.

Mostly, people look at the displays and marvel, or be dazzled or entertained. They do not think that the most crèche displays are not historically accurate.

**According** to the recent findings, it was more likely that Mary gave the birth inside the dwelling, not outside, because in the olden days, people kept the animals inside the building. The similar arrangement was also found in the medieval Europe, as well. People lived on the second floor, and the animals were on the first floor in their stalls, with the fire in the middle to keep warm.

The Holy Parents were not able to get a room, but most likely they were inside the building, at the location where animals were kept. As for the 3 Wise Men, they found the family of the baby Jesus in a house, not in the manger. When the Wise Men

arrived, it was probably many months later, if not nearly one year or more. The approximate time stamp is also helped by Herod's order: according to the story, Herod ordered every baby two years old and under to be killed. If Herod did not know the exact time of birth, then he would have wanted to establish a window wide enough to cover every eligible child.

Nevertheless, even the story of Herod's deed is questioned as a historical fact. Since no historian of the time reported such a slaughter, and since it would have been unlikely that the mass-infanticide of this magnitude would have escaped the attention of the historians, its historicity is much doubted.

**But** when we look at the crèche, we hardly ever think about the historical inconsistencies, and even if we knew about them, they do not bother us. Actually, the historical corrections might sound stranger than the reality as we see it now.

With all that shopping, gift-giving, carol-singing, and vacationing, people are so used to certain aspects of the Christmas. Since those aspects have been observed for so many years, would it appear strange to us, if anything deviated from the way we expect the Christmas to be—for example, no decorations, no vacations, no shopping, and no partying for Christmas?

Would the First Christmas have looked strange to us, if we went back in time to see it? Would our Christmas look strange to the First Christians and the Gospel writers, if they traveled to the future, and saw the Christmas, 2009?

**If** reality can be strange, truth can become even stranger, given the enough time. One particular aspect of Christmas that has faded into obscurity is how intimately the Christmas threatened the established power structure. At least the first Christians observed it to be that way, and they recorded it accordingly.

The first Christians saw the birth of the Messiah as the event that directly threatened the highest power of the land. It was not just only the king who was threatened, but the whole structure that supported the monarchy, and the whole structure that depended on the monarchy. The writer put it this way:

*"When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him."*

The writer explains in the Gospel story later: that was why Herod killed the children.

**For** those who are in the power, sharing the power is the last thing they want. If we leave the human enterprises alone, they eventually morph into a kind of the monopoly. At best, they mutate into a form of trust. Instead of an all-powerful individual, it is now a group of all-powerful individuals that exercise the monopoly in collusion.

The human business ventures and political practices share the

exactly the same principle: domination. For the business, it is the market domination; for the politics, it is the power domination.

**It** is notable that the announcement of the birth of Messiah intentionally circumvented those who were in the business of domination. The angels of God instead visited the common people in particular, those who had no claim to privileges or entitlements.

The Wise Men were instructed to avoid Herod. Herod was to be excluded from participating in the joy of the birth of the messiah. Why is God hostile to the power? Why is God averse to the business of domination?

This can mean only one thing: God distrusts those who dominate others. God wants to keep outside the loop those who dominate others for living. They are not permitted to hear the good news. They are not allowed to become part of the salvation plan, even if they

expressed their desire that they "may also go and pay him homage."

**That** is because God knows that those who are in the business of dominating others say one thing and do another. They would say they also want to pay the new king homage. But the dominators cannot help; they will do what they do best: dominate the new king, too. That is why Christmas bypassed all the elites, the privileged, and the powerful of the land, and went straight to the shepherds of the field—the hired hands, one of the lowliest.

That was what the First Christmas meant to the First Christians. The Christmas is here to free the oppressed. The Christmas is here to signal the end of domination. The Christmas is here to reassure the downtrodden that God is on their side.

**Reality** often fails to tell the truth. Once we have become familiar with reality, even the truth may seem strange, for reality is

capable of distorting the truth. And sometimes, people prefer the immediate reality to the truth. If Herod thought he could dominate the new king, then, those who create the landscape of domination could domesticate Christmas, as well: they could make it into a harmless, cute story that keeps people preoccupied with their surroundings.

For those who were born in this landscape, those who live and prosper in this landscape, and to those who choose to fit into the scheme of such a landscape, Christmas is indeed a season to be merry. To a certain extent, the dominators have largely succeeded, as our culture amply demonstrates.

Reality is always more comfortable than truth. We can get used to reality; but truth always remains uncomfortable and inconvenient. That discomfort is good news, however, for whom God intended the Christmas. May this Christmas be with you always.