

THE BIRTH OF "THE DAVIDSON AFFAIR"

As a minister, I am often asked to tell the story of Jesus. And I am delighted to do so. I am not content, however, to "rehash" an often told story with no relevance for today, about a fantasy figure living in a different time and place, a culture we do not understand, and with which we certainly do not identify. I do not relish portraying as saints men who had arguments among themselves, and displayed the same weaknesses we often wrestle with. While the story is beautiful and relevant even in its original setting, I would like to avoid the tendency to escape responsibility by suggesting that there was a time and place where magic and miracles happened but that was a strange time and place and different conditions than we experience today. I despise the smug self-righteousness that blames "the Jews" for not accepting the obvious and assumes that if Jesus had been born and lived in "my" lifetime, I would not be so foolish.

I dislike the fact that anyone would worship a Jewish Rabbi who spent His life teaching Judaism and hate Jews. Or that we could rob Him of His "Jewishness" and portray Him as a "Christian" (a term coined some years after His lifetime).

What happens if I think of Mary Magdalene as a "massage parlor girl" from Times Square? or the shepherds of the "Nativity" as Taxi-cab drivers (the shepherds of New York City)? What happens if "Saint Peter" becomes "Rocky" and is a mechanic from my neighborhood instead of an ancient fisherman from Galilee? What if Jesus the Christ should come to people like these? people like me? Would the story have a different relevance?

I first told the story of Josh and Maria Davidson about ten years ago. I was speaking at a Bible conference held in a meeting room at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City. In order to increase the immediacy and to help us identify with the characters, I set the scene of the birth of Joe Davidson in the basement of the very hotel in which we were meeting. I noticed an item of graffiti that

said "2,000 years ago there were people with long hair, beards and sandals. People called them Christians and threw them to the lions. Today there are people with long hair, beards and sandals. People call them hippies and throw them to the Christians." However overstated the graffiti, I heard the message and I described Josh and Maria as hippies who had hitch-hiked from California to New York City so that Josh could register for the draft. The story unfolded from there.

The response was more than gratifying. We were able to see Jesus Christ the Son of God and to know Jesus Christ the son of man as well, through Joe Davidson. I told the story again in California, then in London, in Amsterdam and even in Jerusalem. Again and again the response was enthusiastic. Several times I heard the suggestion, "Turn it into a play, put it on stage so it can come to life, the world needs this fresh approach."

It was not until I met Chris Van Cleave that I seriously considered presenting the story as a drama. Certainly I am not a playwright or a dramatist, but a story-teller. We played with concepts of staging at first. I wrote the general concept of the birth scene and Chris wrote "Emmanuel." It was his beautiful song that convinced me to go ahead with the project. I had no grand illusions of a great production. I thought in terms of something small and simple that we could present in a small auditorium or meeting room as an interesting project for a student group. Over a period of eighteen months or so, the drama and the music developed, gathering momentum along the way. People in Australia, South Africa, Europe and Egypt were humming the tunes. People I knew in theatre were asking about the progress. The project seemed to grow and flower as much in spite of us as because of us. Our teaching device became our teacher. We only hope that others will learn as much as Chris and I have through THE DAVIDSON AFFAIR.