

## Tantur Ecumenical Institute Christmas Newsletter



*Tantur - Celebrating 40 Years of Learning, Community & Hospitality  
1972 - 2012*

*A Christmas Message; Finding our way to Bethlehem  
by The Very. Rev. Timothy Scott Lowe*



### News and Reviews:

- **A Christmas Message; Finding our way to Bethlehem** by *The Very. Rev. Timothy Scott Lowe, Rector of Tantur, originally from Connecticut, USA.*
- **Behind the Scenes at Tantur ; The Unsung Heroes** by *Lisa Lowe, Tantur, originally from Connecticut, USA*
- **Christmas in Bethlehem – What’s it really like?** by *Keith Begg, Tantur, originally from Limerick, Ireland.*
- **A Reflection for Christmas** by *Abouna Samer Matanat, Latin Seminary, Beit Jala, Bethlehem, Palestine.*



Fr. Timothy Love, Rector of Tantur and his wife Lisa wish you a very Happy Christmas and may your 2013 be blessed.



Every year at Christmas we all must make our annual pilgrimage to Bethlehem. Not the physical Bethlehem for that would be impossible, but the spiritual Bethlehem. And when I say all, I do not mean just the Christians. The Jews, the Muslims, the Buddhists, the atheists and agnostics, every living, breathing person and thing must find their way to Bethlehem. Why? As I write this the latest human tragedy in this little corner of the world has moved into a ceasefire. It certainly is the right word, isn't it, as nothing is resolved. I could share with you numbers of dead on each side, injured, destruction of infrastructure, monetary cost of an 8 day war and so forth. I could list the endless speculation of pundits and people who actually get paid to express their assessments and opinions about the rationale involving yet again another bewildering if not downright irrational behaviour of both sides, proving again that humankind, especially men, have a greater capacity for destruction than for creation. As a general mass, we are not a very impressive lot seemingly incapable of moving even a centimetre forward in terms of loving our neighbour as one of the defining principles of life. St. Matthew sees in the Bethlehem event of the birth of Jesus a new beginning, not just another chapter in the God/man story. The conception of Christ happens without male (Davidic) seed. The Nativity icon has Joseph off to the side contemplating this point while the tempter is there to squeeze him even more. If you will, Joseph represents a new male role in the Gospel story and perhaps something that the males of the world should spend some time contemplating. The counterpoint to the infant Jesus in the gospel story is King Herod: violent, jealous, paranoid, and power-hungry. Any supposed king, even one who will proclaim later that his kingdom is not of this world is an irrational threat. He understands only brute force and madness, an image of maleness gone far afield, but nonetheless a constant in human history bringing only war and suffering. Matthew invites us to make the comparisons. He invites us to reject the one and redefine ourselves in light of the other. This now brings us back to the need to find our way to Bethlehem as a religious, political and spiritual journey. We must get to Bethlehem and the discovery of a new type of kingship (leadership), a new type of humility, a new invitation of service, and a new use of the world's resources. We must stop the endless race of building monuments to ourselves, our families, our tribes and our nations. We must rid ourselves of endless class, ethnic, religious struggles and fears. We must step out of the cycles of violence and survival of the fittest as these are beneath the journey to Bethlehem and what we will discover there in a small cave, the new doorway to paradise and the Garden of Eden. The journey to Bethlehem, a journey for everyone, plants the seeds of the New Jerusalem. The old Jerusalem, be it the one here, or the one in Washington D.C., London, Moscow, Paris, Tehran, Damascus, and so forth will continue. They represent the old world in all of its ambiguities, suffering and decay. This cannot change. But once upon a time, long, long ago, in a small Judean village, it is believed and celebrated that an infant was born who will show us an alternative way of being. He will live long enough to carry us on his shoulders and solve the dilemma in himself of human behaviour gone astray in all of its destructive forms. We must find our way to this Bethlehem. May you and your loved ones have a most blessed celebration of Christmas.



*Behind the Scenes at Tantur; The Unsung  
Heroes*

by  
Lisa Lowe



Without these wonderful people “The Tantur Family”, Tantur would not tick. From top to bottom, Issa, Manal, Nuha, Issa, Maylena, Judy, Malaki, **Left to Right** Rania, Juliet, Ibrahim & Issa.



Some of our wonderful Admin and Kitchen Staff, the latter making our mouths water on a daily basis with their fantastic food. **From Left to Right**, Rania, Issa, Issa, Shoshanna, Juliet & Jeries



My 3-year old granddaughter Isabel was sporting a red Santa hat today courtesy of Nuha, one of the housekeepers here at Tantur. She was riding on her daddy’s shoulders while drinking her chocolate milk, courtesy of Manal, another housekeeper. She was most likely off to find the bag of candy often left for her by Abu Nasri, one of our night guards. Yes, she is adored and a little spoiled by the staff, partly because she’s a pretty little girl with blond curls and the only child currently residing here, but mostly because that’s the kind of people they are; loving, kind and generous.

Our three month Continuing Education Program just concluded last week and all those folks are now either gone to Rome, or home or someplace else to finish their last weeks of a well-earned sabbatical. I thought that we should give out “Family Cards” at the end of the program, something that identifies the bearer as a member of the Tantur Family (and offer them deep discounts on a repeat visit!). Because in fact, that’s what happens; people come as complete strangers and leave from here as part of a family. They become part of a family that already exists here and continues to exist here when they leave.

I’m not talking about Fr. Tim and I, or our Program Director Tony and his wife Esther, or Keith the Marketing Manager, or any of the other of us who come in, are assigned the task of running this operation, and then move on after a few years. We get a lot of the credit and the kudos and the appreciation, but none of it would be possible without those that have been working here for years, sometimes their entire adult lives, those that cook and clean and keep the lights and plumbing working. The six Issas and two Jerieses, with Manal, Nuha, Judy, Malak, Sahar, Ibrahim, Anton, Jimmy, Sami, Maylena, Juliet and Rania, are the heart of this Tantur family.

Even though I only have about a 50 step commute to my desk each morning, I’m often the last one to work. Several of our employees coming from Bethlehem have already fed their families, gotten their children off to school, stood in line at the checkpoint, trudged up the hill and arrive laughing and joking with each other while I’m stumbling through the breakfast counter trying to get my first cup of coffee. They are my heroes. They inspire me. They love Tantur, they love their jobs, and are justifiably proud of the work they do. I can’t get the kitchen staff to go home these days. The younger cook Jeries wants to learn all he can from our chef Issa so he sticks around after his shift is over. Juliet, the dining room manager, has organized the kitchen staff so well that all I have to do to “supervise” is inform them how many people will be showing up for dinner. And the food is, well....simply superb.

Issa and Issa worked on putting Christmas lights around the tower today. Issa and Malak painstakingly put up and decorated a tree in the lobby. It is perfect. It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas around here. The Tantur family is ready to welcome the next group to come through the doors. There is much to be thankful for this year. At the top of my list are Issa, and Issa, and Issa...you get the picture.





*Christmas in Bethlehem – What is it really like?*

By  
**Keith Begg**

So this is my second Christmas in The Holy Land and I can feel the excitement of the festive season building up. Two years ago I spent Christmas in Dublin. My mind often wanders back to the beautiful Christmas decorations adorning Dublin like strings of diamonds glittering in the moon light. The ‘piste de la resistance’ being the beautiful chandelier lights that elegantly hang on Grafton Street and the hustle and bustle of people shopping, window displays bursting at the seams with Christmas cheer and merriment to be found in the numerous pubs full of the Christmas spirit in more ways than one!

So what is Bethlehem like at Christmas? As a person who enjoys a certain amount of bling and Christmas tradition I have to admit I was pleasantly surprised. In the West we are obsessed with buying expensive presents, having the biggest Christmas tree, that we often forget the real meaning of Christmas. That for one is what makes Bethlehem special. Everywhere you go in this ancient town a mixture of Muslim and Christian traditions assail the visitor’s senses but what is beautiful is the often simple symbolic traditions that represent the holiday season here. While lights adorn many of the streets they are symbolic and representative of the true meaning of the holiday. The Bethlehem Star, Mary and Joseph, Jesus and The Three Wise Men take pride of place throughout Bethlehem. The cribs and nativity scenes are simply beautiful with each Church and house creating little works of art so you are assailed with the spiritual reality of Christmas and reminders everywhere that it was the day Christ our Lord was born. The cribs often represent the struggles and issues that beset this troubled land. I had the pleasure to visit the beautiful Latin Seminary in Beit Jala with its superb vistas of all of Bethlehem. They have the most interesting crib, incredibly poignant and reflective. The crib has the usual characters in place but the outstanding difference with this one is that they have the serpentine wall; the monstrosity that separates the Palestinians from the outside world snaked around the crib also. On one side is the baby Jesus, Joseph and Mary and on the other side of the wall, not permitted to visit the ‘Prince of Peace’ are the Three Wise Men. I stood staring at the crib for several minutes contemplating the simple but tragic symbolism entrenched in this nativity scene.

On a brighter note it is simply wonderful to sit in Manger Square sipping coffee and looking out towards the Church of the Nativity. Thousands of tourists from all over the world descend on the city like a slow moving avalanche wanting to feel close to Jesus on his special day. The lively Nigerians in their traditional dress sing his praise, while the many Indian women dressed in their beautiful colourful saris jostle to get in to The Church where it all began. It is a real feast for the senses and another moment to ponder. It is so wonderful that people from the 4 corners of the world are drawn like magnets to this small town not to shop till they drop or to view almost Disneyesque window displays with all their razzmatazz but to dwell in the place where Jesus was born. This is powerful as the true meaning of Christmas quickly rises to the surface. As I was walking back to Tantur feeling quiet content in myself I passed a house in Bethlehem ‘blinged’ up to the hilt and seemingly attached to its own national electricity grid with the amount of lights on the building. I guess old habits die hard sometimes. ☺

The beauty and elegance of Dublin, Ireland during Christmas time. However more often than not the true message of Christmas is often missed out on!



A poignant reminder of the injustices that still go on in the place Jesus was born. The Three Wise Men are not permitted to visit the Prince of Peace due to the separation wall, like many Palestinians today



Even in Bethlehem it can be hard to escape some of the “bling” of Christmas



One of the most important seasons during the year is Christmas because Christians believe that on this day God took a place in human history. It is also celebrated for social and economic reasons. The date of December 25 was fixed in the Roman calendar in 336. Since pagans used this date as the day of their sun god, and since Scripture in Mal.4:2 reads that the coming of Christ would be the sun of justice, and in John 8:21 Christ is seen as the light of the world, the Church took this date and made it the day of the Lord's birth. *Emmanuel* means *God is with us*. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14), and Isaiah the prophet says: "therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call him Imman'u-el" (Is 7:14). Because a virgin girl from Nazareth said "yes" to God's salvation plan 2012 years ago, she bore the Word of God and gave Him to the world.

Christmas is to say "yes" to God's plan of salvation for each one of us. God is among us. God is love (1Jn 4:9).  
Spreading Christmas joy then means to love others because Christmas is God's love for all.

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