

Reality of the Nativity; A Quichua Christmas in Ecuador

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The manger scene is the centerpiece for many during the Christmas season. Those figurines of Mary and Joseph, Jesus in the cradle, cattle and donkeys, some wise men and the shepherds help to remind us that the reason for the season is the birth of the world's Savior two thousand years ago.

Yet, to modern, urban people, the imagery of a small, Middle-Eastern town, a cattle stall filled with hay, animals and the crisp night air can be a little difficult to comprehend. Certainly, for comfortable Americans the poverty and simplicity of that humble birth is beyond our experience.

One Christmas, however, I came close to the beginning of an understanding of how it might have been. As part of our ministry in Ecuador, my wife Polly and I took two Christmas films to show at a neighborhood party being sponsored by an Ecuadorian Christian. He owned a simple garage, one of those open-air lots bordered on both sides by undulating zinc roofing that served to protect the auto bays on rainy days. The lot was surrounded by unpainted concrete block walls and faced the intersection of two busy streets. It was far from glamorous, really quite simple, somewhat dirty. A few junk cars littered the back of the lot, and there was a makeshift three-room building along one wall where a family lived to guard the property.

Just days before the event, the owner came up with the idea of a Christmas party to share the gospel. He and his family worked hard to prepare a small package of cookies, candy and a Gospel tract for each guest. They ordered films, lined up some benches, rigged a sheet for a movie screen and prayed for the best. Then, they went door to door in the surrounding Quichua-speaking indigenous neighborhood, passing out a simple flyer inviting residents to come to the party. "I thought that we might get 25-50 people," he told me. "I just wanted to share the Christmas gospel with them."

The response was overwhelming. Nearly 150 people showed up, and more came throughout the evening. Mothers nursing babies, children excited about the possibility of receiving gifts, fathers on their way home from work, teenagers out for a social occasion. The benches overflowed and the family scrambled to set up more makeshift seats. Other family members divided up the cookies and candy into smaller packages and a few were sent out to a nearby store to buy more supplies. "I can't believe how many have come," the owner beamed as he rushed to the gate to greet a family of latecomers. Everyone was welcome whether there was room or not.

We began the movies just before dusk. On the sheet/screen, the old story of the simple birth in the poor conditions of the stable played out. Even though some of the children became restless, few left. The audience watched the story unfold in front of them, perhaps for the first time.

I looked over the scene. A rough shelter covered those who watched and protected them from the night dew. Dogs roamed through the yard, mothers wrapped their children in woven blankets as the temperature dropped with the

approach of the evening. I half expected a few shepherds to show up. We had seen some not too long before high on the treeless, wind-swept paramo of the Andean highlands. Rugged people living at altitudes of up to 12,000 feet, seeking refuge in grass shelters. From there they must have been able to see the lights of Quito reflecting against the sky, beckoning them to the warmth and excitement of the city. Could there have been a light, a star to guide them to the humble garage where the Savior of the world was being born again, this time in the hearts of those who came to seek Him?

As we packed away the projector and got ready to return home, I realized that I was probably closer to experiencing the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem than I had ever been. That, more than gifts or carols, dinners or parties, even candlelight services, was Christmas for me.

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