

Letters from Overseas

Gary MacDonald Writes from China

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Dear friends,

In my first year in China, I was told by the college authorities that because I was a non-Chinese I could have the morning of December 25 free from my regular teaching duties. As well, I could attend the Christmas Day morning service in the local church.

At the end of that morning service I stepped out from the church building into a sea of bicycles, open air markets, and a flow of children returning from school. I suddenly thought that in China, December 25 is just another day.

Yet, can it ever be true that any day is just another day?

I still wonder at that same first Christmas in China when I read from the Gospel of Luke to a class who had asked me to explain to them this thing called "the Merry Christmas." I suddenly realized that they were hearing the Nativity story, so familiar to me, for the first time. That experience became more than just another day in the classroom.

My first Christmas gift from a student in China was an apple wrapped in thin tissue paper. Seeing this student dressed in worn clothes all too inadequate for the cold weather but with an enormous smile on his face, and hearing his words of Christmas greeting, I knew that gift was far more than just an apple wrapped in tissue paper.

On campus, students are now preparing for the coming end of term exams. This very evening some will wonder if they can afford to eat an evening meal or should they save that money toward the cost of a train or bus ticket home for Chinese New Year. There will be the parents of these same students, among the many migrant workers of this country, wondering if they can afford to get back home themselves or if they will have to disappoint their sons or daughters again this year. Poverty affects more than just another day.

It is tempting to end this letter by quickly switching into some imagined image of Mary and Joseph travelling toward Bethlehem on just another day. Instead, let me say that then and now, there never was nor is just another day.

It is when we are tempted to see things as events in just another day that injustice, poverty, misuse of power, and all that is wrong are allowed to be. This day, this very day and every day, is a day that God has given us. When we realize this, we turn to good works, today and every day.

A journey to follow a star takes a long time. Not just another day. This Christmas, may we take the journey directed by that star that shone with such hope. If we do, no day will be just another day.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you all!

Gary MacDonald

***Gary MacDonald** is a United Church of Canada global mission personnel associate serving with the Amity Foundation in China. The work of this global partner and the work of overseas personnel is made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.*

