At the Foot of the Cross
A Story You Haven’t Heard

BreakPoint with Charles Colson

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Angel Tree, our Prison Fellowship program for prisoners’ children, is one of the great unheralded volunteer outreaches in America. Over the Christmas holidays these past few weeks, approximately 100,000 volunteers delivered Angel Tree gifts to more than 525,000 children of inmates.

You didn’t read about this in the newspapers, nor would I expect that you should. It’s not really that newsworthy that Christians help people in need. But there are two of our volunteers, who delivered forty presents, that I think you should have read about but didn’t. For reasons best known to themselves, the media ignored the fact that two of the volunteers were President and Mrs. George Bush. And they delivered gifts to forty inner-city kids in a church basement three days before Christmas.

President and Mrs. Bush arrived at three-o’clock, Monday, December 22, at the Shiloh Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia. Now, presidents don’t move anywhere without a great deal of fuss. The police were out, the roads blocked, and Secret Service were roaming around the church. And when the president arrived, he was accompanied not only by his own team, but also by a pool of reporters, forty or so members of the press. For ten minutes they popped their flashbulbs, scribbled their notes, and then were ushered out.

I remember from my days with President Nixon what photo opportunities are: Get the picture and leave. So I thought the Bushes would shortly depart, but they didn’t. They stayed long after the cameras were gone to greet every child, to have their picture taken with them, their mothers, and their grandmothers, to talk with them, and to ask questions. Though the press didn’t report it, I noticed that both the president and Mrs. Bush talked to the Hispanic children in Spanish.

Just before the president left, I introduced him to Al Lawrence, a member of our staff. I told the president that I had met Al more than twenty years ago in a prison. Jesus had got hold of Al’s life, and he’s been working for us ever since. Then I told the president that Al’s son was now a freshman at Yale. At that point the president stopped, exclaimed, “We’re both Yale parents,” and threw his arms around Al Lawrence—an African-American ex-offender being embraced by the president of the United States in a church basement. The ground is indeed level at the foot of the cross.

I tell you this story because it’s a wonderful Christmas story, and you probably haven’t heard it. With all those reporters who crowded into that basement, the visit resulted in almost universal media silence.

I suppose there are many explanations for this, but I’ll offer mine. The president is a Christian who really cares for “the least of these,” who does this not for photo ops, but because he’s genuine. That is something that his detractors in the media simply can’t handle. Conservatives caring for the poor? Never. It dashes the stereotypes.

But surely Christians ought to be rejoicing that the most powerful man in the world and his wife, a couple of days before Christmas, had a wonderful visit with the most powerless people in our society.

After all, that echoes the Christmas message, doesn’t it? The most powerful came to be with the least powerful to give us hope.