

# THE CHILD IN THE MANGER

Luke 2v1-20

Most people are thoroughly confused about what Christmas is all about; they are confronted with a cacophony of sound and a blinding array of colour: Santa coming down the chimney, fairies on the Christmas tree, robins in the snow on Christmas cards, Dr. Who and “It’s a Wonderful Life” on TV, Nigella’s spiced glazed ham, the race for the Christmas Number 1 and Wizzard belting out “*I wish it could be Christmas every day*”. Err, no thank you!

But even Christians are confused when it comes to the Christmas story. Some features of the story need serious re-evaluation because they’ve taken us away from the Bible’s version of events. Here is how the traditional story goes. *Mary went into labour just as she and Joseph arrived at Bethlehem. So Joseph frantically looked for a place to stay. The local inn was full because of the crowds visiting Bethlehem and no one welcomed them into their home. Then someone found them a place where the animals were kept – a cave or a stable, and that is where Mary gave birth.*

This is so much part of the Christmas story that we don’t think twice about it. So I’m going to ruffle your feathers today and make you question whether you can keep on singing some of the lines in our Victorian carols. It might even affect your perspective on little Jimmy playing the innkeeper in the school Nativity play.

Much of the traditional story owes more to a Christian novel written around AD200, than to the Biblical text. It was called ‘*The Protevangelium of James*’, the work of a writer who was familiar with Luke’s account but then expanded it, adding his own imaginative detail. This work of fiction was slammed at the time by all the theological heavyweights, but the details survived.

Kenneth Bailey, a scholar and expert on the Palestinian background to the Bible explains: ‘*In the novel, as they approach Bethlehem, Mary says to Joseph, “Joseph, take me down from the ass, for the child within me presses me, to come forth.” Responding to this request, Joseph leaves Mary in a cave and rushes off to Bethlehem to find a midwife. After seeing fanciful visions on the way, Joseph returns with the midwife (the baby has already been born) to be faced with a dark cloud and then a light overshadowing the cave.*’ (Bailey: ‘Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes’. IVP Academic. 2008)

## What the Bible actually says.

So, what does the bible actually say? And does our knowledge of Middle Eastern culture help us? For starters, the text says: “*While they were there the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son*”. (v6) No time frame is given but the strong suggestion is that they had been in Bethlehem for some time before the birth. There is no hint that Mary went into labour as they were entering the village and therefore no reason why Joseph should search frantically for a place to stay.

The idea that no one would offer hospitality to a couple in such dire straits is also ludicrous. Sadly, in our culture, we *can* imagine this. It happens every day; people in difficult circumstances end up sleeping on the streets. But in a middle-eastern village (then or now) this is unimaginable; it would be considered a disgrace; the village would carry the shame for generations.

But what about the two words in the text that give every encouragement to the traditional story? I mean "*manger*" and "*Inn*". We find them both in Luke 2v7: "*She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*"

## The manger

For us the word "*manger*" suggests Jesus was born in a stable, and this fits with the idea of a frantic search and there being no alternative. But understanding the layout of a traditional Middle Eastern home changes everything. The home was simple, usually consisting of one large room where the family cooked, ate, lived and slept - and a guest room added on to the end of the house or built on the flat roof. At one end of the main family room there was a space where animals were kept overnight for their safety and to provide warmth for the family. Mangers for the cattle were holes dug out at the lower end of the living room. (See diagrams in Bailey's book)

This is much more likely to have been the place where the family found shelter and the type of manger in which Jesus was laid. I don't believe Mary and Joseph were turned away. They were welcomed into a simple peasant home, into the main family living room by hospitable strangers, or perhaps by Joseph's relatives. Yes, there would have been animals around at night, but this was *not* "*a lowly cattle shed*".

## The Inn

So what are we to make of the reference to "*no room (i.e. space) in the inn*"? (v7) We need to forget about Premier Inns and B&B's. Here, Luke doesn't use the word for a commercial inn. He does use that word elsewhere in the story of the Good Samaritan, but not here. The word used here refers to "a guest room". Luke uses it again later in his account of the upper room used for the Last Supper.

Here then, Luke is simply reporting that Mary and Joseph were welcomed into the family room of a home because *the guest room was already occupied*. When the time came for Mary to give birth - the men would have vacated the house and the local midwife and other women would be called to assist at the birth. Then the child would be swaddled and put to bed in one of the mangers.

And this proved to be highly significant. The "child lying in a manger" (v12) was the sign given to the shepherds in the fields. But in what sense was this a sign?

## The “sign” of the baby lying in a manger

Understand this: shepherds were at the bottom of the social scale and were among the poorest and least educated in society; Rabbi's labelled them as “unclean”. How could they expect to be admitted to the birthplace of the promised King? A royal residence or the governor's mansion would be out of their league. But no! The angels anticipated their anxiety. The child had been born in a simple village home and laid in a family manger. A home just like theirs! This was a sign for lowly shepherds. So they hurried away to see this special baby.

After the shepherds had visited the child they went on their way “*glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen*”. (v20) One modern song starts “*From the squalor of a borrowed stable.*” No! No! No! Had the child and family been in some squalid stable or cave any one of the shepherds would have been scandalised and immediately taken them to his own home. Not to do so would be to bring shame upon them. But there was nothing amiss. The family were receiving good hospitality. The shepherds could go on their way “*praising God*”.

## The message for us today.

Someone might say this has robbed us of one of the themes of Christmas – that even at His birth Jesus was refused shelter. And what about little Jimmy who is all set up to play the innkeeper in his school nativity? I'm very sorry about that. But none of it has robbed us of the primary truth that the coming of Jesus was and is *good news for the poor*.

At his birth Jesus was welcomed into a simple home and lowly shepherds were the first to be invited to see Jesus - as honoured guests. The child in the manger was a sign to the shepherds and it is a sign for us today. Jesus is good news for the poor.

At the outset of his public ministry Jesus announced that he had come with good news for the poor. Throughout His ministry it was the poor who heard him gladly while the rich and powerful invariably turned their backs on Him.

It has been the same through the centuries. It is still so today. In nations where there has been unprecedented growth of gospel it has largely been among the poor. Meanwhile rich Europe and the west have been resistant to the gospel. But it is good news for the poor.

Yes, in the UK there are those who are stuck in the poverty trap. And yes, the present recession is going to give many more of us a taste of what it means to be poor. The recent floods in the area have hit some people very hard, particularly those without insurance – hence our appeal today.

Little in the UK compares to the situation in Zimbabwe at the moment where: starvation is forecast for 40% of the population within 2 months; cholera is killing thousands because of polluted water; inflation is at a staggering 200%

a day and where people queue for hours to draw a daily allowance which will buy one third of a loaf of bread. Christians are working in the frontline to bring good news to the poor – practical help and kindness in the name of Jesus.

Of course, poverty is not just a matter of money. You can be comfortably off and still poor. Jesus is good news for you too if you:-

- carrying the baggage of failure wherever you go
- have been rejected and abused
- feel helpless and powerless
- feel you don't compare favourably with others
- can never please your loved ones no matter how hard you try
- feel you have nothing to offer
- know you need God's mercy: *"God be merciful to me a sinner."*

Jesus is good news for you. The child in the manger is a sign for *you* as it was for the shepherds. No matter how poor and needy you feel, Jesus loves you. He knows what it is like. Others may turn their backs but He will not.

**John Wilthew. December 2008**