

Followers of the Way

Laid in a manger

Lynda Rose, 17-12-23

Micah 5:2-4, Luke 2:6-20

I wonder, what do you imagine when you read that Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn? We had Steve's sermon last week, of course, putting forward the theory that the word 'inn' in Lk 2:7 might be a mistranslation of the Greek word *kataluma*, more properly translated as guest room, rather than paid lodging, so that a more accurate understanding of the text may be that Mary and Joseph had sought a bed for the night from a relation, but couldn't be offered accommodation in the main part of the house, because it was already full, so were forced to sleep on the ground floor level with the animals. But whether this is a more accurate understanding, or whether the pair really were forced to seek shelter in a purpose-built stable or a cave, it can't have been optimal conditions to have a baby. So what do you see in your mind's eye? A warm cosy stable, with low lighting and a few friendly cows standing at the side, looking fondly at a cosy carrycot shaped feeding trough, filled with sweet smelling straw? That really is one of the main messages of Christmas, isn't it? This cosy stable, with a baby lying in a manger!

But let's take a reality check. Wherever Mary and Joseph wound up, whether it was a cave or the ground floor of a house, it was where the animals were kept, and because of that, it would have been a bit rough. It would undeniably have had straw, and it was probably quite warm, with the heat given off by the cattle, but it would also have been filled with dung and urine – not for nothing do farmers talk about 'mucking out the stable' – so it would have been dirty and it would have stunk. It might have been a bit noisy too, if the animals were awake, and it would definitely have had vermin ... rats and mice. And that sweet little manger where Jesus was lain – let's not forget, it was the fodder trough for the cattle, so it would probably have been stone ... and it too would have been a bit mucky. All highly insanitary! These days, where there's a new baby, everything has to be sterilised, doesn't it? But this didn't happen for Jesus. Thankfully, it doesn't sound like the cattle tried to take a nibble, but from the beginning, Jesus had things 'rough'. In fact, I think one of the most miraculous things of all is that He survived!

Let's face it, whether a stable, or ground floor shelter for the cattle, this definitely wasn't the most ideal of places to give birth to your firstborn son. So was Mary upset ... was she frightened? She seems to have had her *birth case* ready, of course, because she wrapped the baby in bands of cloth. In other words, in keeping with the custom at the time, she swaddled him, and she could only have done that if she'd prepared in advance. A 'plus' for Mary. She wrapped Jesus up so that he wouldn't feel frightened at suddenly being deprived of the protection of the womb, and so that he'd be warm. But even

though she'd clearly prepared in advance – giving birth in a stable must have been a bit of a shock, and I wonder if she maybe felt a bit annoyed ... or frightened. She'd certainly have been entitled to, when you think about it!

And it wouldn't just have been finding herself in amongst the cows – Mary had to give birth without any of the female support from her family, that would normally have been expected. So did she get any help ... did she have a midwife? Well, the gospels don't mention this, so we don't know for certain, but we do know from the Old Testament that it was normal practice for midwives to attend births – for example, in Exodus 1:15-21, we read that the midwives who've been ordered by Pharaoh to kill all the males babies, tell him, '... the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.' (v.19). So, normal practice would have been for a midwife to attend the birth, and in all probability Joseph would have summoned the local Bethlehem midwife as soon as he realised Mary was in labour. Certainly, in the Apocryphal gospel, the [Protoevangelium of James](#), it's recorded that Mary was attended by two midwives, but this dates to the latter half of the second century, so I'm not sure we can attribute much historical veracity to it. The simple answer is, we don't know if Mary had any female support at all – and if she hadn't, that would have been hard.

But why did Mary and Joseph have to go to Bethlehem in the first place? Well, we heard last week about the census called for by the Emperor Augustus, and since Joseph was descended from King David, of the tribe of Judah, he had to go back to be registered in his ancestral town ... which was Bethlehem. And we know that around 700 years before, the prophet Micah had prophesied that this would be birthplace of the Saviour. v.2 'But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is of old, from ancient days'. So, as Steve reminded us last week, we know that God used the political and military power of Rome to bring about the fulfilment of Scripture.

But I wonder if, like me, you find yourself wondering what was so special about *Bethlehem*? Why did God choose this particular town to be the birthplace of His Son? Well, of course, it had been the birthplace of King David, and obviously for Jesus to be born there immediately connected him with that ancient house and God's covenant. 2 Samuel 7:13f '... I will establish the throne of His kingdom forever. I shall be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me...'. And v.16 'Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever ... your throne shall be established forever.'

But this was a fulfilment that went way beyond any earthly kingdom, and I think it's interesting that the name Bethlehem means House of Bread, so named apparently because in early times the poor came to the town to get a free loaf of bread. At the time Jesus was born, Bethlehem had actually become pretty insignificant, but it still remained 'the city of the King'. Put this into a broader perspective then, and the House of Bread is birthplace not just to the rightful King of Israel, but to the One who will feed all humanity – the bread of life. So in this baby, laid in an unsanitary manger, we see the inbreaking power of God into the darkness, and the beginning of the restoration of His reign.

But if this was the fulfilment of God's eternal promise to redeem and save mankind, how striking that Bethlehem figuratively closed its doors, forcing Mary to give birth amongst the cattle. We read in John 1:11, 'He came to His own, and His own received Him not ...', and that was the reality for Jesus from the moment He was born. He was outcast, unwanted ... we know His family was going to have to flee to Egypt, because Satan wanted to destroy Him. In every sense, Jesus was the stone rejected by the builders, but the reality is that God was keeping Him hidden, until such time as He was fully grown, and was physically and spiritually strong enough to confront Satan and fulfil His call.

Down and dirty – this was the beginning of Jesus' preparation. There's so much rich symbolism in the place and manner of His birth. The fact they had been chosen meant it was never going to be easy for either Mary or Joseph, but from the beginning God had known exactly what He was about. This young couple had been prepared, they were provided for, and they were protected. Nothing that happened in the circumstances of Jesus' birth was a mistake – everything, down to the very last detail, had been carefully planned by the Father.

This Christmas, we're once again celebrating that holy birth, but we're looking forward too to the completion of God's plan, and for the Lord's return in glory. That's maybe very soon now, and though we can't see the end from that beginning in Bethlehem, we know that everything has been planned down to the last detail, in order to give every man, woman and child on the planet a chance to hear the good news and choose life.

There is truly a battle raging over the earth, but that's why **we** are here.

There can be no compromise with evil ... no tolerance. A 'little bit of sin' isn't going to work. A 'little bit of sin', if unrepented, means death, and in these last days, humanity is being faced with a choice ... between God and the devil, between life and death.

A few short days after Christmas we'll be welcoming in the new year, so here's a suggestion. The light shines in darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it, so let's make 2024 the year when we call for purity. Let's stop reacting **against** 'sin' and how awful everything is; and let's call men and women into the light.

Let's unashamedly call people – and this especially means the Church (as well as ourselves, of course) – to righteousness.