

Beyond the Manger¹: Luke 2. 1-20

May I begin with a confession? It won't come as a surprise to some of you that I do find aspects of the Christmas story challenging: the two very different narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the involvement of astrology, and the addition of elements to the traditional story from non-canonical, non-biblical sources – there are no donkeys or lowing cattle in the Biblical accounts. But most important of all is the simple fact that we – and our society as a whole – so easily miss, or actively ignore, what the story is pointing us towards. It's like trying to point something out to a pet dog. The dog will look at the pointing finger rather than the object you are pointing at!

One part of the story that most people might know about is the manger, the Christmas crib, the most famous animal feeding-trough in history. You'll see it pictured on Christmas cards, churches make elaborate 'cribs' and sometimes encourage people to say their

¹ With acknowledgement to N T Wright from whom I first learned of this connection between the crib and the shepherds.

prayers in front of them. We think we know about the animals too, even though, apart from sheep, none is mentioned. Yet the ox and the ass still feature prominently on cards and in carols. The shepherds are usually pictured or portrayed in infant nativity plays with their sheep. Luke does not say that the shepherds took any with them as they 'hurried' off to Bethlehem (sheep do not hurry!) nor that there were any in the place where Mary and Joseph were staying.

And let's be clear about where the narrative says they were staying. Tradition has them knocking at an inn door, being told there was no room, and then being offered the stable along with the animals. But the word for *inn* in the traditional translation has several meanings, and it's likely they were, in fact, on the ground floor of a house where the people normally stayed upstairs. The ground floor would be used for animals – hence the feeding-trough or manger, which came in handy for the baby – but there's nothing to say there were actually animals there at the time. In fact, the availability of an *empty* feeding-trough suggests the opposite. To concentrate on the manger

and to forget why it was mentioned in the first place is rather like the dog looking at the pointing finger rather than the object to which it is pointing. So ... why does Luke mention the manger three times in his story?

The answer is: because it was the feeding-trough that was the sign to the shepherds. It told them which baby they were looking for. And it showed them that the angel knew what he was talking about. No doubt it's a wonderful human touch in the story to think of the young mother finding an animal feeding-trough ready to hand as a cot for her new-born. I'm sure we've all heard the sermon about God reaching down into the mess of real life. But we should be clear that the reason Luke has mentioned it at all is because it is important in giving the shepherds both their news and their instructions.

And why is *that* important? Because it was the shepherds who were told *who this child was*. The child is the saviour, the Messiah, the Lord. The manger isn't important in itself. It is a signpost, for us as well as the shepherds, to the identity and life-task of the baby who's

lying in it. This is the first time anyone, other than Mary and Joseph, knew of the good news. It is from the shepherds, summoned from their fields by the host of heaven, that Mary and Joseph hear the first acknowledgement and confirmation of what, until this point, had been their secret.

Should we assume that the shepherds, like many other Palestinian Jews at the time, would have known what a saviour, a Messiah, a Lord was to do? Let's remind ourselves.

Luke has begun his story by telling us about Augustus Caesar, way off in Rome, at the height of his power. Augustus was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. He became sole ruler of the Roman world after a bloody civil war in which he defeated all his rivals, the last being Mark Anthony who committed suicide after defeat at the battle of Actium in 31 BCE. Augustus turned the Roman Republic into an empire with himself at the head; he proclaimed he had brought justice and peace to the whole world; and, declaring his dead adoptive father to be divine, styled himself as *son of god*. His poets

wrote songs about the new era that had begun; his historians told the long story of Rome's rise to greatness, reaching its climax with Augustus himself, of course. Augustus, people said, was the *saviour* of the world. He was its *king*, its *lord*. Increasingly, in the eastern part of his empire, people even worshipped him as a god.

Meanwhile, far away on that same eastern frontier, a boy was born who would within a generation be hailed as Son of God; his followers would speak of *him* as Saviour and Lord; his arrival, they thought, had brought true justice and peace to the world. Jesus never stood before a Roman Emperor, but at the climax of Luke's gospel he stood before the Emperor's representative, the governor Pontius Pilate. I think Luke certainly has that scene in mind as he tells this tale: how the Emperor in Rome decides to take a census of the whole of Palestine and how it is this census that brings Jesus to be born in the town which was linked to King David himself.

I think the point Luke is making is clear. The birth of this little boy is the beginning of a confrontation between the Kingdom of God – in

all its apparent weakness, insignificance and vulnerability – and the kingdoms of this world. Augustus never heard of Jesus of Nazareth – Augustus died in 14 CE – but within a century or so some of his successors in Rome had not only heard of him, they were taking active steps to obliterate his followers, and within three centuries the Emperor himself became a follower of the ‘Way’.

When you see the manger on a Christmas card, in a church or even in someone’s home, don’t stop at the crib. See and understand what it’s pointing to – the explosive, revolutionary truth that the baby lying there is already being spoken of as the true king of the world.

Κυριον Ιησου – Jesus is Lord!