

The REAL Christmas Story

NT Reading Luke 2 v 4-7 (NIV)

2⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was **no guest room available** for them

Readings on Light – John 1v1-5; 8v12

John 1 In the beginning the Word already existed; the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² From the very beginning the Word was with God. ³ Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him. ⁴ The Word was the source of life,^[a] and this life brought light to people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.

John 8v12: Jesus spoke to the Pharisees again. “I am the light of the world,” he said. “Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness.”

Jesus is Born – The Nativity

Our images of the nativity

Have you ever been in a Nativity play. Anyone played the part of say the donkey or the Innkeeper? Think of you r play, of the crib seen on your fireplace, think of the carols and Christmas card images. This is what they tell us..

God makes Mary pregnant. She is betrothed to Joseph who is from the ‘family line of King David’ and when a census is announced has to travel to David’s town Bethlehem. He takes his heavily pregnant wife with him on a donkey. She goes into labour as they arrive, and desperately look for accommodation, but no-one will put them up and heartless innkeepers say they are full and send them packing, until one says that they can use the stinky old stable round the back. The stable we are told by our Christmas carols is squalid and draughty with an open door. The weathers awful, snow on snow on snow. Mary gives birth there and before she knows it, the room is full not just of horses, cows, sheep and their donkey, but a bunch of shepherd stroll in with stories about Angel choirs. Despite the cold, squalor and noise of animals and guests, the baby is perfect; “no crying it makes” says Away in a Manger. Then three Kings rock up on camels bringing amazing presents and add their deserts beasts and themselves to this wonderful crib scene. As we pan back from the open door we see the star hanging just over the roof apex and a couple of angels flying there blowing long horns. Then the couple are told that King Herod wants to kill the baby, and they have rush off to Egypt. Wow – **what an incredible day** for Mary & Joseph.

Where is it from?

But where does this story and all its elements come from for the birth day of Jesus? You say, well the Bible of course, from the Gospels. It must be there because we read them out every Christmas. Well let’s look at the four Gospels. Mark and John do not mention the birth of Jesus at all. Matthew who wrote mainly for the Jews, has bits before and after, but on the day of the birth itself he says this. “Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the time of King Herod”. And that’s it. Jesus **was** born – a place and a time. So we need to turn to the remaining Gospel Luke for the details of his birthday, and we believe Luke in researching his Gospel interviewed Mary.

So before we go any further, I want to put on a pair of spectacles to view the nativity through. It has two lens. One is a 'scriptural lens' and the other is a 'cultural lens'. What does this birth day look like through these lenses.

First a question. Which of these four are not in the Gospel account: The donkey, the Innkeeper (and his wife); the stable and the 3 Kings. What do you think? Open you bible to Luke 2 and see if you can find any of them. No – none of these words appear in either the Matthew or Luke narratives. Does that surprise you?

Look – I'll give you the donkey, because although he does not get a mention, it is quite probable they had one. So 'little donkey' you are saved. There were not 3 Kings, but some time after his birthday they did get a visit from some Magi, which we often call the Wise Men. It's plural, so we know there are at least two of them, but we are not told how many. They brought three different gifts between them which is where the number comes from. They were expensive gifts too, but they were not royalty, though they may have worked for a royal household. They studied the ancient scriptures alongside studying the stars and planets, which foretold them of the coming King. This is more than the Jews were doing. Matthew tells us that they came from the East, actually from Arabia. Those living in the Holy Land refer to the East as the area east of the Jordan Valley. Beyond which is the Jordan desert linking up with the Arabian desert, and beyond which was Arabia, nowadays is Saudi Arabia. That's why they are depicted on camels because they had to cross the desert to get to Bethlehem. At that time Frankincense was a unique product from Southern Arabia, so would have been a rare and precious gift to present from their homeland There is a Beduoin tribe in Jordan called the Al-Kokabani, which means those that study planets. They claim that they got their name from their ancestors who travelled West to Palestine to honour the great prophet Jesus when he was born.

So we'll keep the donkey, and will replace our Kings with wise planet watchers, but today I want to put the 'inkeeper' and the 'stable' under scrutiny in the dock. Are you prepared to lose them?

I never liked the role of the wicked Innkeeper, it didn't ring true to me. But first let's look at the culture of the day. One striking characteristic of the first century Jews was their strong hospitality culture. If a visitor came to your house, then the reputation of your whole village could be at stake, on how you treated him.

Were Joseph and Mary really turned down hospitality?

What about Joseph who came from Bethlehem, was probably brought up there and had a number of family and friends still in the town. Our nativity story has Joseph rejected in the town of his ancestors. No-one seems willing to accommodate him. None of his friends and family take him in, nor none of the hostellers. Yet this is his place of birth, his origin. In the Middle East, they have long memories when it comes to families and their historical links to the small town. It's important to them. He could walk into the town and announce I am Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat, and most households would be immediately opened to him. Yet more than that, Joseph was a descendant of King David. Whereas Jerusalem was known in the bible as the City of David, to those living in Bethlehem, rather than using its formal name would refer to it as the 'Town of David'. Being a descendant of this famous family, Joseph would be welcome almost anywhere, he may even be regarded there as a minor celebrity! It is inconceivable that he would not be welcomed home.

Then what about Mary – Whatever the culture, women about to give birth get special attention. Who wouldn't interrupt their current plans or work to help a lady in labour? This was even more true in Jesus' time when one in four women died in childbirth. The bond amongst women was really strong, especially in rural communities, the women would help a fellow woman in childbirth whatever her circumstance. Would an innkeepers wife allow him

to turn a heavily pregnant woman away, even to turf her out into a stable. If he did, he would probably get struck round the back of his head with a rolling pin!

Could it be that this large village, or little town of Bethlehem had lost all sense of hospitality and compassion on this one night. Is it really possible they have not got together to find adequate shelter and provision for this young couple lady in need. I do not think it is credible.

Was it really all in a day?

The trek from Nazareth was about 90 miles and would have taken 4 to 5 days travelling for the couple at the normal pace on that route at 3mph. Longer if Mary had been struggling. By the time they had reached Bethlehem, they were already south of Jerusalem and only a few miles from the home of her relatives Zechariah and Elizabeth who Mary had stayed with a few months early. If they had failed to get shelter in Bethlehem then surely she would have travelled a few extra miles to her relatives. Perhaps she did not have time to go there because she was already in labour. That is the image we have from 'all in an action packed day' nativity story; but this does not seem to be what scripture is saying.

Look more closely at Luke 2v6. "Whilst they were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to have her baby' (Good News) or "Whilst they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered" (KJV). This indicated that the final days of her pregnancy were spent in Bethlehem. i.e. At some time during their stay Mary went into labour. There is no indication, that there was a panic to find accommodation on arrival at Bethlehem because Mary's water had already broken, with Joseph desperately knocking at hostelry doors. I think we just made that bit up! They would have had time to travel on to Elizabeth's if necessary, but it can't have been necessary. Why because Bethlehem must have obeyed the cultural laws of the day and gladly welcomed them in. If this is true then Luke 2 verse 7 becomes a problem.

"She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room in the inn."

In 1978, the NIV translation of the Bible was released and praised for its accuracy. This translation finishes the verse *"there was no guest room available for them"*

Two questions immediately arise from . Where was the manger? Why was there no room in the Inn, if what I have said about the culture is true?

The Manger

Luke tells us that Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger. Wrapping up the baby helps them feel safe and secure. Babies have jerk reflexes when they sleep and they can sometime startle themselves and wake themselves up. Swaddling prevents this happening. This was a tradition particularly of poorer people in Jesus' time, to wrap babies up to a month old firmly in strips of cloth, and it adds cultural authenticity to the account. That's all good, and an animal feeding trough would certainly make a comfortable alternative to a Moses basket for a swaddled baby.

To Western ears when we hear the word manger , a feeding trough for animals, we immediately think of a barn or a stable, accommodation for animals only. But not so, for Middle Eastern ears.

People of great wealth would have separate barns for their animals but this was not true of normal people. Their house would typically have two rooms, a large family room where everyone lived and slept, and a separate smaller guest room at one end or up above. The family room may be on a slight slope and at the bottom there would

typically be a lower area, down a few steps in which you would keep at night your family donkey, cow and perhaps also a few sheep. They would be tied up in the courtyard during the day when you would sweep the family floor down into the animal area, then clean this area out. The door at the lower end of the house is therefore used by both people and animals.

The manger would either be built into the floor of the living space by the divide, or be a movable wooden trough normally situated on the floor at the bottom of the family area, and would be at a good height for the animals down in their lower area to eat from. So it would be common for normal homes to have a manger in the main living area, and have the animals in safe and secure at night. These simple homes were in use in the area from the time of King David (c 1000BC) right up to the twentieth century, so for nearly 3000 years.

There is no mention of a stable anywhere in the New Testament. The manger that Jesus was put in, was in the family room.

Katalyma – Guest Room

As often happens, the understanding of a passage can rest with the translation or mistranslation of a single word.

There is no inn-keeper in the nativity, the only innkeeper in the New Testament is the one in the story of the Good Samaritan. In this parable the injured man is taken to an Inn. The word that Luke uses for such a place, where you pay for accommodation is the greek word *Pandocheion*. If Mary & Joseph had been looking for paid accommodation then this is the word that Luke would have used. But in 2v7 he uses a different and more generic word for a space to stay in, the greek word *Katalyma*. This has three possible translations, meaning 'inn', 'house' or 'guest room'. The King James Version has 'inn', but as we can see culturally it is very unlikely there was no room at the inn or in a house, so we are left with the NIV's word which is Guest Room. This is the second smaller room in the house. Because of the strong culture of hospitality, despite them being poor and having a simple dwellings, there was still a room for guests. It makes perfect sense.

There was never a wicked inn-keeper in the birth story of Jesus, we simply mistranslated 'guest room' as 'inn', and made the rest up.

Nativity Corrections

- Mary probably didn't know she was full-term when she travelled. She probably had a donkey, but there is no mention of one.
- She didn't go into labour the moment she arrived, they had probably been there for a few days before her waters broke.
- Joseph and Mary were not turned away by an Innkeeper or anybody else. They would have been extremely welcomed in Bethlehem and had a number of accommodation options available to them with friends and family in and around the town.
- Jesus was not born in a stable. He was most likely born in a regular two roomed house, but were quite happy to stay in the family room, even though the guest room was already taken, as they were keen to be with this family rather than stay in the guest room of some-one they knew less well.
- There were no 3 Kings in the story. There were Astrologers referred to as Magi or Wise Men, though we do not know how many, just that three types of gifts are mentioned.
- The whole nativity scene may have been over a period of two or more weeks (perhaps much longer), but not in a single day.

So let's run through the nativity story again, but this time reinterpret it as seen through the lenses of scripture and culture

Nativity retold with new interpretation

Mary is pregnant, and Joseph has to take a several day journey to Bethlehem to register for the census. He would sooner she stayed behind in her condition, but there could be weeks to go yet. [There is no ultra-sound machine in the nearby town of Sepphoris !] She is adamant that she does not want to stay behind, just in case the baby does come, now with all the nasty rumours of whose child it might be. So he relents, they take it easy and 5 days later arrive in Bethlehem. He is keen to stay with a close friend of his, and they both receive a very warm welcome into the town, which is very busy as numbers have swollen for the census. When Joseph arrives at the house, his host is very apologetic. There is no room in the guest-chamber because a close family member, his wife and children are staying for a couple of weeks. They would be more than welcome though to stay with him in their family room and would be well looked after, or he could find them another home to stay in. After some pleasantries Joseph assures his friend that they are more than happy to stay in the family room and will sleep near the bottom by the manger. They are not in the least bit offended by the host's dilemma. A few days later, Mary goes into labour. Joseph stays as do the women, and the men are sent down the pub to let the ladies get on with it. When the baby is born, they wrap Jesus in swaddling clothes, as per the tradition, put him snugly into the manger, next to where Mary is lying, and then the women give the couple some time alone with the baby and go off to join the menfolk.

The Shepherds.

So, these shepherds then arrive, nervously approaching the house, and are allowed in to see the baby, having had an angelic message to go and find the future King. They were looked down on by many first century Jews and would certainly not have been welcome into a Rich Man's house, but when they arrived and found it was a normal family home, they were confident to enter. What they found was a couple in basic but comfortable surroundings, being well looked after. If they had found Joseph, Mary and the baby in a squalid stable then one of them would have insisted that the new family come home with him. His home was not much but it was far more suitable than a stable. The hospitality culture would have made sure that this happened, however there was no need because they would already be being looked after better than the Shepherd could have done so. Hence no offer.

But does this really change anything – Isn't the key message of the nativity unchanged?

Even without innkeepers and a stable, it is still a great story. I love to think of the look on the faces on the Shepherds when the angels appeared, and that on Mary's face when the Magi rolled up on camels with expensive gifts for their little baby. They brought gifts and we have been exchanging presents ever since.

The Shepherds I am told, were so lowly in society they were not allowed to be a witness in court. Yet God chose these peasants for an angelic visitation and to give witness to birth of the Messiah. The wealthy Magi foreigners came also to the house to pay tribute to the special baby.

It demonstrates the accessibility of Jesus and God to men and women of any colour or social standing.

No-one is too lowly or too high to kneel and worship at the feet of Jesus.

No-one is too lowly or too high to bear witness to the great God things that God has done.

It is a wonderful unchanged nativity message, but I think there is something missing from our normally told nativity. It does not expose the caring nature of God towards Mary and Joseph.

A Caring God

When Gabriel appeared to Mary, she was told – Peace be with you, you are highly favoured. Don't be afraid'. I don't think God intended for her to have any unnecessary suffering. Yes they had to go to Egypt to escape Herod, but would have had a bag of Gold to fund their travels. I don't think God would have made a teenage girl pregnant at a time when 1 in 4 died in childbirth then made her have the baby in an unsanitary stable with no female support to help deliver the boy. Unsupported, except for Joseph, in a dark dirty stable, she would have been very frightened. God chose Mary and Joseph and would not wish *unnecessary* suffering or fear upon them.

Joseph being warmly welcomed by friends and family, and the birth scene in a house supported by other ladies may not be as dramatic as the stable version, but I think it fits in better with the character of our loving God. He chose them for his purposes, and he provided for them in both natural ways (through friends and family) and through supernatural ways such as using a star to lead the Magi to them with a bag of Gold and other gifts, plus dreams to guide Joseph. It is a great picture of a God who chooses you and caters for you on your journey whatever twists and turns it takes.

Emmanuel – God is with you. Not to deliberately drive you into events that will make you fearful, but as a gift to help you each day of your life.

The two big Gifts

The words in Matthew sum up the key issue. **Jesus was born**, in Bethlehem. That's what's really important, Jesus **was** born. This was probably for me Jesus' best miracle. God had been a bit remote up til then, but then around 4BC, God gave humanity a gift. Jesus. What a great gift. Immanuel – God is with us. For the first time humanity could see how God behaved, how he prayed, served, forgave, danced, cried. This was as much God as you could squeeze into a human life form, Jesus Christ.

He had to come to live and die, but he was from Mary, he was flesh, and that body would never had lasted forever. That gift was always going to be a temporary one.

When the gift of Jesus in bodily form was lost, only the memory and the impact of his teaching and healing remained. But then there was a second gift, one that Jesus had promised to send us. The Holy Spirit. Once again God was with us, this time in the form of his Spirit, and this time the gift would stay with us. God would be with us, and is with us forever.

But we have to accept and keep accepting this gift.

Accepting the Gifts.

God wants to be with us. I wonder how many gifts you got last Christmas were put to one side, or put away in a drawer never to be used. What would be even worse if the gift was rubbished on receipt, refused or given back.

My next door neighbour as I was growing up was Mr Banbury. My family happily exchanged gifts with him every year. When he died, we had the job of cleaning out his bedroom and found presents of ours from across the years unopened, still in their Christmas wrapping. I guess he never needed our Jams, sock, biscuits and chocolates, but we cannot afford to leave our gifts from God unwrapped.

Immanuel – God is with us. He comes as a free gift, paid for by the sacrifice made on the cross. With this gift, is the power to save and the power to heal. On becoming a Christian we accept this free gift, but then what do we do.

Perhaps for some it stays in the wrapping, for others they may be excited about it for a while but then it put it away in a drawer!

Draw Close.

If you can, I want you to put your arm around the shoulder of some-one near you , or hold their hand. Hold it for a while if that's okay and think about your year ahead.

I do not know what the journey of the next year will hold for you. I expect it will have some joys and some sorrows, some routine, and some unexpected events, in different measures for each. It may be a hard journey but you do not have to do it alone. I think that's the message of Christmas is that we have a God that cares for us. God cares for you and God is with you.

He, yes he, has put into your life friends and family – choose which ones to draw in close on your journey and rejoice in their love and support. They are God's gift to you.

He has put you in a church family. Jesus said they will know you are my for disciples as you show love one for another. Think about your Christian friends from this Church and elsewhere. God has put us there for you. Choose which ones to draw in close on your journey and rejoice in their love and support. If you want a listening ear ask for it, if you want prayer ask for it, if you want some practical help ask for it. Don't be afraid to ask several people for what you need on your journey. We are Gods gift to you too.

But then everyday take time out and ask Holy Spirit to draw close to you, to teach you about what Jesus would have you do that day or the next, how to journey and who to journey with. Whether you can physically feel his presence or not. Emmanuel – God is with you, just like he was with Mary and Joseph. Just in the same way that he provided for them both in natural ways and in supernatural ways, then God will provide similarly for you.

Jesus was born. He was born for you, so he could be with you. How amazing is that?

Keep your friends and family and your church family close. Keep the Holy Spirit closer. Don't shelve him like an unwanted present. He will never leave you or forsake even to the end of time, so keep him close, and be blessed in whatever lies ahead of you. **Amen.**