

## Sheffield Cathedral, Christmas Day, 25.12.17, 10.30am Holy Communion

### Luke 2.1-14: Away in a Manger

#### Introduction:

As some of you know, Cathy and I are expecting to become grandparents for the first time at some point in the next two or three weeks. Lately we've had fun watching our son and daughter-in-law prepare for the birth of their baby girl. We've seen their spare bedroom become cluttered with kit: there's a pile of baby-grows, and a 'travel system' buggy-cum-car-seat; there's a change mat and a good supply of unopened nappy-packs. And there's a cot. What there isn't, is a manger. Of course there's no manger: what parent would place their newborn in a manger? Well, I suppose the answer is: a parent who's been overtaken by events.

*Away in a manger (no crib for **his** bed), the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head; the stars in the night sky look down where he lay: the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.* It's **such** a familiar detail, **such** a fixed part of the Nativity story, that it's actually easy to overlook it, and to overlook its meaning. So this morning, it's on the Christmas manger that I want to focus.

Our Gospel reading today falls into two parts. You can see that from the way it's printed on page 8 of the service booklet. Part one features Mary and Joseph: it's set in a shed or stable somewhere in Bethlehem town centre, where the baby Jesus is born. Part two features the shepherds: it's set in the fields somewhere outside the town, where they're watching their flocks by night and are suddenly surprised by an angel and a heavenly host, announcing that a Saviour's been born. And the detail that links the two sections, that holds the

reading together, is the description of the infant, wrapped in bands of cloth, and laid in a manger. For the next ten minutes, I want to say a few words about each of those two scenes in turn. I want to ask, first of all, what the manger might've meant to Mary and Joseph; and then secondly, what it might have meant to the shepherds. I hope that by the end we may glimpse what that manger can mean to you and me as well.

### **1. Laid in a Manger (verses 1-7): Setting the Scene:**

First of all, then, the first scene: the birth of Jesus itself. What must that have been like for Mary and Joseph? Personally, I have no doubt that they were real people going through a real experience. The child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, it's true; and Mary and Joseph had both received visits from angels, telling them that he would be the Saviour of the world. But for all that, this was a real pregnancy; and in some ways, an ordinary pregnancy, and I'm convinced Mary and Joseph will have prepared as parents always prepare for the arrival of a first baby. Like any woman, Mary will've been counting down the months, the weeks, the days. She'll have imagined herself giving birth at home, in Nazareth, among family and friends: with her mother maybe, or sisters or aunts, and the local mid-wife in attendance. I bet that's how Mary pictured it.

And Joseph will've had expectations too. He may not have been the father exactly, but I bet he was determined to be the best Dad a child could have. I can see him decorating the nursery, or doing whatever Dads did in those days. And being a carpenter, I bet he made a cot; and I bet he used every ounce of skill and care and experience in building it.

Then comes the news that the Roman Emperor has ordered a census, and they have to travel to Bethlehem. And the trip has to be made right when the baby's due. 'Ah well', they say, 'We'll only be away a week. It's three days there, three days back and one day to register in. First babies are often a couple of weeks late. And if the worst comes to the worst, I'm sure we'll find somewhere warm and comfortable in Bethlehem: they're good folk down there'.

But no! Just as they're approaching Bethlehem, Mary realises she's in labour. When our first son, Jonathan, was born, Cathy went into labour while we were away from home for the week-end visiting friends. She told me her waters had broken, and I'm ashamed to say I thought, 'It's probably nothing; it'll settle down again in a bit'. But that night she was rushed across the Lincolnshire fens in an ambulance, with me chasing behind in our little car, to get her to the nearest hospital. And as Mary first mentions the stomach pains, I picture Joseph thinking to himself, 'O Lord, let it be indigestion, please let it be indigestion'.

And the moment they enter Bethlehem they know they're in trouble. If you've been to the supermarket at some point this week when it's been heaving, you'll know you can tell from the first moment that there's no way you're going to find a short queue at the check-out. Well this will've been like that for Mary and Joseph. As soon as they see how busy the streets of Bethlehem are, their hopes of finding a clean and comfortable B&B disappear. They try a couple of places, but sure enough they're full. They keep looking, but all the time Mary's labour is advancing, and then it is an emergency. The moment comes for the baby to be born and suddenly Mary and Joseph will settle for anything. All their

hopes and careful plans go out the window. They'll settle for having the child in Bethlehem, among strangers, although they'd rather have had it among family in Nazareth; they'll settle for having it in a shed, although they'd much rather have found shelter in a guest house. And later, when the panic's over, and the baby's arrived, and it's clear that Mary and Jesus are safe, they'll even make do with lying him in a manger, in an animal's feeding trough, when they'd rather have laid him in purpose built crib.

Now, just picture Mary and Joseph for a moment, standing over that manger, as calm returns, gazing down at this tiny baby. What do you suppose they were feeling? Relief, almost certainly; and yet relief tinged with regret. Think how hesitantly, how reluctantly any parent would lay a new born baby in a manger, from which animals have been eating. Think of the germs! Can't you just see Joseph shaking his head as he remembers the crib he's so lovingly built in Nazareth, and saying to himself, 'Sorry, son, it wasn't supposed to be like this'.

This morning, this is part of the meaning of that manger. At the mid-point of the Christmas story, it stands for all those times in our lives, when we find ourselves shaking our heads in regret and disappointment, maybe even in anger, and saying in a wistful sort of way: 'It wasn't supposed to be like this'.

I wonder what sort of a year 2017 has been for you? I'd be a bit surprised if you haven't wept your share of tears of sorrow at some stage in the last twelve months - and even if you haven't, you'll know those who have. Certainly the world has: in Manchester and London, in Vegas and Lahore, in Mexico and the Caribbean. The manger stands for all the times when we've had to say, 'No: this isn't how it was supposed to be' or even 'Sorry. I didn't mean for it to be

this way'. It stands for all those times when life has taken a bitter turn, when we've had to settle for less than we hoped for, and for those times when we've given someone less than we had hoped to.

## 2. Lying in a Manger (verses 8-14): Understanding the Sign:

But thankfully that is just the half-way point in the story, and this morning it's important to go on to ask, what did the manger mean to the shepherds?

Scene one of our reading ends in that shed, with Mary and Joseph gazing down at the new-born Jesus, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. Scene two opens in some nearby fields, where the shepherds are watching their flocks. And don't forget that they didn't **know** it was Christmas Eve; there was nothing special about that night, they didn't have any great sense of expectancy. It was just another night's work for them. But a few hours into the shift, in the quietest, darkest hour of the night, as they slept or chatted, and minded their own business, the night sky suddenly lit up with the glory of the Lord, and an angel appeared to them out of the blue.

The angel had a message: 'Don't be afraid! I've got good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day, in David's town, your Saviour has been born: Christ the Lord. This will be the sign for you: you'll find the baby wrapped in strips of cloth, and lying in a manger'. So, what does the manger mean for those shepherds? Why is it good news? How does it bring great joy? Well, maybe in two ways.

In the first place, the manger is given to the shepherds as a sign that the message of the angel is true. The shepherds will know that this baby isn't just any baby, but is truly the Saviour when they see him wrapped in rags and lying

in an animal's feeding trough. That will be their proof and guarantee. Isn't it wonderful that the very thing which is a source of sorrow to Mary and Joseph is turned into a sign of salvation that brings joy to the shepherds? It also matters, that a manger is part of a shepherd's every day familiar experience: because this is what God is like. He has a way of taking our ordinary, every day experiences, including our regrets and real sorrows, and turning them around, taking them into his great project of salvation, bringing good out of them, and even joy. Even joy.

But finally: the manger is more than just a proof and a guarantee for the shepherds that the message of the angel is true. The manger is a sign not just that Jesus really will be the Saviour of the world, but of the sort of Saviour Jesus will be: a Saviour who takes precisely the bits of our lives which don't work out as we hope, and heals them. And sure enough, as Jesus grew up, his ministry was the sort of ministry the manger had suggested it would be: a ministry lived out among the poor not the rich; a ministry to the margins of society not the mainstream; a ministry to the despised, not the respectable. And when he died, this Saviour died the sort of death the manger suggested: not in comfort, but in pain; not in glory, but in shame; not in triumph, but apparently in defeat. And that's just the point. Jesus isn't less of a Saviour because he was born in a cowshed and died on a cross: he's all the more the sort of Saviour we need, the sort who knows our disappointments and regrets and brings his salvation to the very parts of our lives, and the very parts of this world, where there's the greatest sadness and pain; the sort who knows about our weaknesses and shortcomings, and brings forgiveness to the very parts of our lives where there's the greatest guilt and remorse. In the end, for me, **that's** the meaning of the manger. It's a

sign of the sort of Saviour Jesus Christ came to be. Which is just as well, really, because that's exactly the sort of Saviour we need; the sort the world needs.