

Of Inns, Mangers and Sheep

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Saturday 25 December 2021

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Christmas Day C

Isaiah: 52: 7-10; Luke 2: 1-20

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Little Johnny was upset. He really wanted the part of Joseph in the school nativity play, but the teacher had given the part to Stephen instead. Johnny was given the role of the innkeeper. All he had to say was, *"There's no room in my inn. But you can have the stable round the back if you like."* Over the weeks of rehearsals, Johnny plotted his revenge. The day of the play came, and Stephen in his role as Joseph knocked on the door of the inn. When Johnny as innkeeper opened the door, Joseph asked, *'Have you a room for us? My wife is about to have a baby and is very tired.'* Johnny beamed and replied, *"Of course, come right along in, I'll get the best bed made up!"* But Joseph was not to be put off. With great presence of mind, he looked through the doorway, and turned back holding his nose announcing, *"This place is not fit for my wife. We'll go round the back and sleep in the stable!"*

We all know the stories of the inn, the inn keeper and the stable. People have been having fun with them, elaborating them and generally using their imaginations for centuries, certainly since the medieval mystery plays gave a starring comic role to the inn keeper. But the truth is that none of them is actually in the Biblical narrative – itself an imaginative tour de force – or at least the inn might be there, but probably not really.

The word sometimes translated as 'inn' is an interesting one. 'Katalumati' in Greek comes from a verb that means to unyoke animals. When you've unyoked your animals, you've come to your journey's end and hence perhaps to an inn; at any rate to a lodging place. The word is used in just one other place in the gospels – which perhaps suggests a connection between the two – in the instructions that Jesus gives to the disciples who are to prepare the room for the Last Supper. Jesus tells them to ask, *'where is my katalumati – my guest room – where I may eat the Passover with my disciples.'*

For the word more often refers to a guest room in a private house, rather than a more public dwelling. It seems unlikely that a little place like Bethlehem had an inn anyway. More plausibly Joseph's gone home to his extended family, but for whatever reason they do not make him and his pregnant wife welcome – perhaps he was estranged, or just too long gone from Bethlehem to be recognised and given a bed on a crowded night.

So, if we take the narrative at face value – acknowledging of course that this story is about theology not history – Joseph goes home – but he's not welcome and nor is Mary and the unborn infant. Perhaps indeed we could infer that he is not welcome precisely because he has stood by Mary when his family thought he should have *'put her away quietly'* and not brought disgrace on the family name.

Theologically it seems that Jesus – even before he is born - is rejected; not made welcome. From the very first moment this puts Jesus in solidarity with the poor, the neglected and the unwanted. We tend to think of Jesus as surrounded by praise and adoration – angels, shepherds, wise ones and even the ox and the ass all kneeling at their feet. But at best most of these come a little later. At the moment of his birth, even in the sanitised Biblical account, Jesus is a little frail scrap of unwanted humanity, born perhaps like many refugee children in an open field under the stars, and laid to rest in a sheep's feeding trough – as rough as it gets. Jesus's birth was more like the birth of an infant on a rubbish tip than in even a family home.

And that's the miracle. That the Christian story conceives that the maker of the stars and sea (or however you want to describe God), that the greatest we can imagine (and imagination is vital) becomes the least we can imagine for our sake – and this gives hope to the hopeless.

There simply is no stable in the text. It has been inferred – where do you find a 'manger'? In a 'stable' – or in that part of the house where animals sleep. And it is possible that Mary and Joseph had that degree of shelter. A very early tradition holds that Jesus was born in a cave – a cave indeed owned by some shepherds, themselves considered unclean, the lowest of the low and forbidden entry to the temple. We might want to think about who we exclude from our temples.

Some variant manuscripts of Luke's gospel read that the shepherds will find the child lying not in 'a manger', but in 'the manger' – suggesting that this is the shepherds' own manger, and they know where to find it. Certainly, they need no star to guide them to the right spot. We will never know the truth, so over laid is the story with theological import and generations of tradition. What matters is to realise that the supposed 'inn', the stable and the inn keeper are all imaginary, though legitimate meditations on the text. The one thing that Luke wants us to hear is that Mary lays her child in a manger.

Now even at a surface level this tells us a great deal as we've already seen. It tells us that Jesus was numbered with the poorest of the poor, rejected by humans and at the level of food for animals, for that is what a manger is for – something for animals to eat from. So, Jesus is placed in a sense even lower than the animals. But we need to think about it harder. For the Greek word '*topos*' meaning 'place' is important in the text here too – literally '*there was no place for them in the guest room*'.

This is not just a matter of physical location. It's about standing and power and position. We have the same expression in English actually – 'it's not my place to do x or y' we say. It was not Joseph and Mary's 'place' to be in the household, with the family. In our Australian society, to whom do we deny a 'place' consciously and unconsciously – and in doing so deny a place to Christ?

Let's think a little more about the 'place' that Jesus spends the first hours of his life – and very quickly we will discover that this is a theological and a sacramental matter. Mary 'lays him' in a 'manger'. Many twenty-first century Westerners lay their babies down in a cradle to sleep. But in Mary's culture, especially given the expressed circumstances of the birth, it would seem more likely that she would have wrapped the child and kept him papoose style close to her body for warmth and comfort. So why does the writer cause her to do this?

There is a clue in the Greek word used for 'to lay down', which is also used of the disciples at the last Supper, because it means 'to recline at table for a meal'. So already in this story we have two veiled references to the Last Supper.

Luke is telling us through this story exactly who this child is, and who this child will be. Jesus is laid in the 'manger'. Now our English word manger derives from the French verb 'manger', meaning 'to eat.' So, Jesus is laid in the eating place – in the place which the shepherds know as the place where the sheep eat – specifically the sheep, not really other kinds of animal for the purposes of Luke's story; forget about the ox and the ass, they were Isaiah's theological idea and telling something slightly different!

This 'eating place' where Jesus is placed, is the place the sheep come to be fed. So, the question is, 'who are the sheep?' Traditionally in Jewish stories, the leaders of the people are the shepherds, most notably of course King David, the shepherd king, from whom in Luke's genealogy Jesus descends – and the people of Israel are the sheep. And in succession the followers of Christ, the people of God, are described repeatedly by Jesus as '*the sheep of his flock*'.

So we – the followers of this new shepherd king, whom shepherds are sent to greet and worship, are the sheep – and we feed upon the One who is laid in the manger – upon Christ, under of course the guise of bread and wine at communion. The link between the story of Jesus' birth as Luke tells it, and the story of the Last Supper is powerful – and even more obvious theologically when we realise that the city of David the shepherd king where all this supposedly takes place is Bethlehem – a town whose very name means 'place of bread.'

So, the shepherds are sent in this complex theological narrative to the place of bread, to worship the One who is the Bread of Life, lying in the manger – the eating place. Just as Luke will conclude his gospel with the breaking of bread on the road to Emmaus, so he begins it with the covert invitation to feed on the bread of life, inviting us with the shepherds to the manger.

For this is the message of Luke's angels – that in the manger lies the One who will feed us with their very self; that in that eating we will receive eternal life and this is indeed good news for all. And furthermore, everywhere that Christ dwells becomes a manger – a feeding place where others may be nourished.

When we open our hearts, Christ dwells there and others are fed. And the good news is that Christ does not even require that our hearts be clean, and well-lined and prepared – a dirty smelly sheep trough was good enough the first time. It is good enough today.

Christ will dwell in us if we ask – and feed us with Christ's-self, that we may feed others at the mangers of our hearts.

So today, this Christmas Day, may we make of our hearts mangers where Christ may dwell, and all find a place to feed.

Amen