

Manger, mess and muddle – sermon on Xmas Eve 2008
Luke 2: 1-20

The most famous version of the Xmas story comes from the evangelist Luke. Matthew has a very different one, Mark and John have none. But Luke has it almost all: the census, the birth in the stable, the shepherds and the angels, - we only have to borrow the kings from Matthew.

Luke makes it clear: the Xmas story is no fairy tale. The birth of Jesus and the census that caused Mary and Joseph to make their way to Bethlehem, are rooted in historical reality. At Xmas we celebrate the birth not of an idea, but of a real child, who is Christ the Lord.

But back to the story: tax demands are never welcome, especially not when they involve a personal appearance with a tax inspector. Joseph, because he was an “offspring of the house of David” had to show up personally in the village of his ancestors: Bethlehem.

He took Mary with him. The baby Mary was expecting was due any time.

In modern terms the journey between Nazareth and Bethlehem is not long. It was a distance of only 85 miles. But it was a journey that in those days had to be done on foot, or maybe on a donkey. It was a journey full of hazards: street robbers, dusty and dirty roads and steep mountains... all challenges to everybody – and how much more to Mary in the final stages of her pregnancy.

In Bethlehem Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, and like any other Palestinian mother, she wrapped him in bands of cloth. Then she placed him in a manger. And that manger is a sign of the mess and the muddle into which God came.

We live in a world where status symbols are important. The designer dress, the turbocharged sports car, the Rolex watch, the Lagerfeld handbag: all signs of wealth and success.

How far removed all this is from the world of Jesus...

The only “sign” that the angel gave to the shepherds in our story was that ***“you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger”***. This was the sign that a saviour, the Messiah, the Lord had come.

What an amazing and paradoxical sign!?! Hardly fitting for one bearing such honoured titles!

In the first place, this sentence said by the angels was expressing a sign of recognition. Needless to say it was not the bands of cloth but the manger that was the key to recognition... There was nothing unusual about babies in cloths. Such cloths were standard in homes rich and poor. Not to wrap a baby up in such a way would have been not to care for the child.

No, it was the fact that the baby was lying in a feeding trough that was significant. No fancy “Moses basket” for this child. Instead, a first century equivalent of an orange box.

This was the sign by which the shepherds knew that they had arrived at the right place.

And I wonder by which signs we would know that we are in the right place – in the place where God is being born?

Where are the mangers today?

Maybe not in this church, but somewhere on our way here, somewhere in our lives, among our friends, or at least somewhere in our thinking, as a burden or a fear, as a memory or an issue of interest or commitment...

A look in the newspaper may help.

A look around the city may help. An hour spent in the foreign office department for asylum seekers, a glance into hospital wards and old people's homes may help. A visit to those who live on unemployment benefit, or who have to work more than one job to feed the family may help. An afternoon spent in the asylum seekers' place in Baierbrunnerstrasse may reveal more mangers to us than we'd otherwise come across in our well-settled and comfortable lives.

The manger in the Xmas story of Luke was not only a sign of recognition. It was also a sign of the lifestyle Jesus would adopt later in his life. Do you remember how at some point – also in the gospel of Luke – he said: ***“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”***

Following Jesus meant letting go of material comforts.

Following Jesus means living with mangers... which probably comes as quite a shock in today's status-orientated consumer society.

Most important in all this reflection is that the manger is a sign of God's presence... of the depths to which God went in order to come among us: the “Lord in a manger” is almost beyond comprehension, beyond normal human thinking and expectation. But it is exactly what Luke's Xmas story wants to teach us today...

...and did teach people then.

Not all of the people of the Xmas stories we know were at the manger right from the beginning. In fact only Mary and Joseph.

All the others came only later, after having been told and after having travelled far and searched long. And: there is no mention of animals in the biblical account of Jesus' birth. Just check with the texts in your bulletin.

To start with – in the stable – there were only Mary, Joseph and the baby.

And then shepherds are mentioned, shepherds near by. Living in the fields and keeping watch over the sheep.

Here we may well imagine ordinary shepherds and ordinary sheep, people at the bottom end of society, and far from being very godly. In first century Palestine shepherds had a reputation for being downright irreligious. They were so far out of the normal society that they were called “people of dirt”. And no halfway sensible and respectable Jewish parents would have wanted their daughter to marry a shepherd. Shepherds just couldn't be trusted.

And yet, it was to shepherds that God sent the angels' choir. It was to shepherds that God made known that a saviour was born. It was the shepherds and not the wise men, who were the first to receive the news!

What does this say to us?

Surely this: Jesus is good news for everybody!

Listen again to the words of the angel: ***“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day... a saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”***

...spoken to the underdogs and the outcast. To all – not only to church members, middle and upper class people with beautiful clothes, posh cars and heavy bank accounts. Spoken to the world...

It obviously doesn't matter who we are or what we have done. God speaks to us, comes to us, accepts us just as we are. We don't have to reach a certain standard of holiness before God loves us. He loves us as we are. We don't have to prove ourselves. We don't have to become somebody else or something better. The good news is that there is nobody outside the reach of God's love! And to prove this, God sent the message of his son's birth to a bunch of freewheeling shepherds spending the night in the fields, taking care of their sheep.

Nobody had ever brought them good news before. And suddenly they discovered that they were on God's guest list. To them a saviour was born! No wonder, after visiting Mary and Joseph and their baby, the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God. There was much to celebrate! Glory to God in the highest...

So, what do these shepherds teach us tonight? The shepherds had their failings. Their lives were far from perfect. They were doubtless rough-and-ready people. And yet their response to the choir of the angels is adorable. First of all, they followed up what they'd heard. They could have remained in the fields, wondering about what they had just experienced. There was surely much to talk about. But instead they said to each other ***"Let us now go to Bethlehem and see..."*** Were they at this point already "believers"? When they set off for Bethlehem, were they already on a journey of faith? If so, then they set us an example of putting faith into action. However, it is more likely that they were still on a journey toward faith; they had yet to be convinced of the truth of what they had heard. Nevertheless – they were willing to ***"go and see"*** for themselves what this baby was all about. In doing so, they set an example of honest search and enquiry!

Secondly, the shepherds did not delay their journey. They could have debated at length whether they should go; they could have spent time arguing about the significance of what they had just seen and heard. As it was, ***"they went with haste"*** to find the baby Jesus. In so doing they set an example to us again. It is so easy to waste one's life away, forever talking about religion, but never actually taking the road to Bethlehem, never looking for Jesus himself, never getting round to finding out the truth about him.

Thirdly, the shepherds found ***"Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger."*** They'd found the child. Maybe this itself wasn't a big thing. Bethlehem may have been crowded because of the census, but it was still a small place. Nonetheless the shepherds surely had

to do some searching before they found the baby. And I feel reminded of the words of God spoken through Jeremiah: ***“When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD...”***

The finding does depend on the searching! The shepherds found because they put their minds to the search.

And last but not least: the shepherds told others. They told others what they’d experienced – with the angels, with the baby... and as a result “all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds had told them.”

In this respect, too, they set an example to us. They couldn’t keep quiet about their experience, and in particular they couldn’t keep quiet about Jesus.

What would we have done, I wonder, had we been in their place?

Would we, as the shepherds did – return from our experience with God back to our everyday lives “glorifying and praising God”?

I hope and pray we would!

The chance to do so - is now.

Merry Christmas!