

## THE SERMON for CHRISTMAS DAY 2019

Isaiah 62: 6-12, Psalm 97; Titus 3: 4-8a; Luke 2: 8-20

Our lead up to Christmas has been like being on a journey. How many of you here this morning has had to make a long journey to get here? Where have you come from? I wonder who has come the furthest?

Who here is celebrating their first Christmas?

Is this the first time you have heard the story of a baby in a food trough?

No! For most of us, while we look forward to Christmas (probably so we can get some presents!) we tend to switch off to or get blasé about the real story of Christmas.

Who thinks they know the story of Christmas really, really well?

Okay, I'm going to give you a bit of a "Hard" quiz! You see people tend to add things to the story, and that thing called "tradition" has added bits that we now think are really part of the story! Let's see how well you really know the story!

Question 1: When Mary was told she was going to have a baby, were she and Joseph:

- a) just good friends
- b) recently married
- c) engaged to be married

*(They were engaged to be married)*

Question 2: How did Mary get to Bethlehem?

- a) she and Joseph walked
- b) she rode a donkey
- c) nobody knows

*(The Bible doesn't say how they got there. There's no mention of a donkey.)*

Question 3: What did the innkeeper say to Mary and Joseph?

- a) Come in, you're very welcome
- b) I can give you the honeymoon suite
- c) The inn is full, but there's a stable out back
- d) There's no room at the inn

*(There's no mention of an innkeeper in the Gospel accounts!)*

Question 4: Where was Jesus born?

- a) in a stable
- b) in an inn
- c) in a house
- d) in a cave

*(We don't know. The Bible doesn't say where he was born. All it says is he was laid in a manger)*

Question 5: Which animals were there when the baby was born?

- a) donkeys
- b) cows
- c) sheep
- d) goats
- e) mice

*(The Bible doesn't mention any animals at all.)*

Question 6: What is a 'heavenly host'?

- a) A choir of angels
- b) A group of saints
- c) An army

d) Nobody knows  
(Elsewhere in the Bible, the words 'heavenly host' refer to an army) ... no wonder the shepherds were terrified!!!

Last question: What song did the angels sing?

- a) Joy to the world
- b) Rudolph the red nosed reindeer?
- c) Glory to God in the highest
- d) Jingle bell rap

(None of these! Not even C. They sang 'Glory to God in highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!') <sup>1</sup>

I will leave it there; I could go on and on. You see, so many people have added bits on to the story and our hymns are probably the worst offenders. There is the classic question of how many wise men were there? (Pause for the usual answer of 3) Most people will immediately say three, but if we go back to what is written in the Bible, it doesn't actually say how many there were. There is mention of three gifts given, so people have naturally assumed down the ages that there must have been 3 wise men!

Advent is the time of preparation, preparation for Christmas, as Lent is a preparation for Easter. The four weeks of Advent is like being on a journey, and this is a story of journeys, both physical and spiritual. Mary and Joseph travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, probably in the company of other members of Joseph's family, because they all had to go to their ancestral home, which in Joseph's case, being of the line of David, was Bethlehem.

The shepherds who were at work out on the hills surrounding the town, journeyed in to see this thing which the angel had spoken of.

This year I have become more aware of the inaccuracies in our traditional reading of the nativity story. Several contemporary writers I have read recently, have put the story into a more historical, realistic frame.

Most of us picture Mary and Joseph making that journey alone, whereas, as it was a census calling everyone to their place of origin, they were more likely travelling in a large group of Joseph's relatives and others travelling with them.

The "no room in the inn" is speculated to refer more to the guest room in a home, rather than what we would think about as an inn in our times – a hotel, motel or guest house.

The stable we think about as a separate building or a cave away from the home, was probably the ground floor of the house which was often used for the animals – hence the manger or feed trough which was handy to put the baby in.

We journey to the manger each year, but then what? Are we changed by the spiritual journey we have made or is it a bit "ho hum"? Do we come to do our duty or are we really changed by the journey?

The baby is cute but born in a smelly place and cradled by a feeding trough (where I can imagine the animals trying to get to the hay and grain, gently nudging him out of the way. Mary is young, beautiful, with peaches-and-cream skin and an aura of virginal innocence, even though she just gave birth to a baby. Joseph is like most dads, standing there stunned, wondering how in the world he is going to feed another mouth.

But scripture does not want us to focus on the humans; it wants us to look beyond them and to see what God is doing through this mystery, this miracle, this conundrum. We need to look beyond the *Hallmark* moment, to that mysterious moment of wonder. <sup>2</sup>

Being a mother and a grandmother, I am reminded of the untold joy and mystery that the birth of a child can bring. Who will this little soul grow into, how will he or she change the world as each one journeys through life?

At Christmas time we are especially drawn to the baby in the manger, and we might ponder who that child *did* grow up to be. How that baby would grow into a man who would bring good news, freedom, healing and hope to a people who were oppressed, and would be the inspiration to so many throughout the ages.

Jesus turned the world up-side-down with his teaching: an “eye for an eye” became “turn the other cheek”; and a concern to look out for “number one” became a generosity of heart which looked after those less fortunate, giving each and every individual respect and dignity for who they are, whether we actually like them or not, Jesus even encourages us to love our enemies! This is who we come to worship. Are we changed by the experience?

British bishop and theologian, Tom Wright, talks about us focusing on the wrong things, and by having our vision focused on the manger, the stable etc. we are missing the point. The baby in the manger was a way of identifying the baby for the shepherds – telling them which baby they were looking for, and that the angel knew what he was talking about.<sup>3</sup>

Why was this important? Who remembers what the message of the angels was?

"Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." [Luke 2: 10-12]

The significance is not the scene they found but who they found there:

This child is the savior, the Messiah, the Lord. The manger isn't important in itself. It's a signpost to the identity and the task of the baby boy who's lying in it. The shepherds, summoned in the fields, are made privy to the news, so that Mary and Joseph, hearing it from this unexpected source, will have extra confirmation of what up until now had been their own secret.<sup>3</sup>

Some years ago, as an Advent preparation, I read a little book by Edward Hays, called *Meeting Christ at Broadway and Bethlehem*. At one point he talks about a new birth or re-birth which needs to take place in us as we come to the crib at Christmas.<sup>4</sup> As we meet Christ once more in the form of the baby in the manger, we try to be re-born to be more like him, so we can give birth to a side of us that the world has yet to encounter – the very best of who we were created to be.

As you greet the baby lying in the manger this Christmas, don't get stuck there, it is but part of the journey. Keep moving but consider what, through that encounter, will be given birth in your life?

With my prayers for a happy, holy and safe Christmas. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley tssf  
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#### REFERENCES:

1. Glendon Macaulay from *Dirt, Mess and Danger – Liturgies & worship resources* © 2011; from Wild Goose Publications, pp. 34-36.
2. Thom Shuman, in discussion on 'Birthday' on *midrash*, 22.12.2011.
3. Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*.
4. Edward Hays, *Meeting Christ at Broadway & Bethlehem – Day by day through Advent*, © 2009 from Forest of Peace, Notre Dame, Indiana.