
Sunday 27th December – The First Sunday of Christmas

Readings: Galatians 4:4-7 & Luke 2:15-21

Galatians 4:4-7

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

Luke 2:15-21

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

Reflection

This story about the visit of the shepherds to the baby Jesus is very familiar to us. As something we've all heard time and again over the years, the challenge is to find something fresh and new in it. But as I read it through, I particularly noticed the phrase that the shepherds found the baby lying in a manger. Luke is the only one of the four gospel writers to mention the manger, and he mentions it three times, in verse 7, verse 12 and here in verse 16. Something that is repeated is obviously of

significance, and so I'd like to think about that this morning and offer you some thoughts about the meaning of the manger.

Before I get on to that, it is worth explaining what a manger was. The word comes from a Latin word meaning to chew or to eat, and you might notice its similarity to the French verb *manger*, to eat. A manger then was a feeding trough which would have been kept in an area in which animals were held, and as such would have been filled with hay or straw. Our nativity scenes classically have Mary, Joseph and the baby in a stable, but its much more likely that this would have been the ground floor of a house where the people stayed upstairs and animals were kept below. Alternatively, Jesus may have been born in a cave; there is an area near Bethlehem to this day called the Shepherds' Fields where you can see the dark and foreboding environment into which Jesus may have been born. In any event, the manger would have been constructed from stone and not wood, and as somewhere from which animals ate, not the cosiest or cleanest of beds for a new born. What then is its significance?

Firstly, the manger would have been dirty, a place where slobbering animals fed. No doubt Mary and Joseph did all they could to clean it up and make it comfortable with hay, but make no mistake, this is a place of poverty, a place associated with the humble poor, and not a palace befitting the birth of the Son of God. In his birth then, Jesus associates himself with the poor and the outcasts, a particular emphasis you'll see throughout Luke's gospel.

Secondly, the significance of the manger lies in the fact that it is confirmation to the shepherds that Jesus is the baby they are seeking. Remember the angels had given them this sign: *You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger*. It was customary for all babies at that time to be wrapped in swaddling bands, that was not at all unusual, but babies were not commonly laid in a manger. This then is the sign that this is the baby who is the Saviour, the Christ and the Lord, the baby who is to restore our relationship with God that we might be children of God, as our reading from Galatians tells us.

Furthermore, it is significant that a manger is place from which animals came to feed. And it was in Bethlehem, a place whose name means 'The House of Bread'. In John 6:35 *Jesus says I am the bread of life* And in Luke 22:19 at the last supper, as he gave them the broken bread, he said *This is my body, given for you*. The manger is in itself then a sign of what Jesus has come to do. He is to offer himself as bread for all our souls. He is the spiritual food to which we must come to feed, and which alone will satisfy our spiritual hunger.

There's one last thought I'd like to offer you. We read that *Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart*. The arrival of the shepherds and their story of the announcement from the angels is confirmation for Mary too that God is still with her. But this confirmation doesn't mean that her life and the life of this baby from now on will be all sweetness and light. Later in this chapter she is warned by Simeon: *A sword will pierce your own soul too*. God being with us similarly does not mean that everything will go well for us, that all our plans will fall into place. Perhaps as we live through life in tier 4 we need to be reminded by the manger that God can use our weaknesses, our disappointments, our suffering to bring him glory. In this upside down world that is the kingdom of God, God incarnate is laid not in a luxurious bed in a palace, but in a manger. And for that, maybe we can join in with the angels, singing *Glory to God in the highest!*

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