

Evensong on 30.12.18 – The Innkeeper

+ Over there at the other end of the Cathedral in our beautiful crib scene you'll see the infant Christ, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and an innkeeper. No Nativity play, crib set or crib scene would be complete without an innkeeper. Yet in the NT two inns are mentioned, but no innkeeper. The inns both appear in Luke's Gospel, one is in the account of the Good Samaritan and the other, from which all our innkeepers are descended, from Luke 2:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Last month a group of us made a pilgrimage to the place where Jesus was born, in Bethlehem. You have to go down a steep flight of steps, it's dark and feels like a cave, the walls are made of rough rock. Now, it's under the Church of the Nativity in Manger Square, but 2000 years ago it was probably where animals were kept at night, under a house, or an inn.

Someone, presumably our innkeeper, showed Joseph and the heavily pregnant Mary into the only accommodation available. A poem by the contemporary Ealing poet Godfrey Rust highlights the parallels between Noah's ark with its precious cargo and the manger, containing the Saviour of the World:

The ark sailed backwards through the centuries, beyond the reach of modern scholarship: Einstein discovered nothing to which it was related, Galileo failed to trace its course in the stars, da Vinci could only speculate on its design, Columbus was the boldest, with the least successful result – and when it was found at last, by the shepherds acting on a tip-off, it was much smaller than we had imagined, just a wooden box, with a few beasts attending, hardly adequate, you'd think, for the deliverance of all humanity from the flood of judgment, its single occupant asleep, and over all the covenant sign, not a rainbow but Golgotha, the soul's true Ararat.

The poem's complicated theology hints at all that lies ahead: deliverance, judgement, the New Covenant, Golgotha, salvation. But the innkeeper's simple action of offering shelter, and a wooden box, to those in need, putting himself out for others, does more than hint at what is to come, his action brings the future into the present: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' If you see someone in need, help them, don't walk by on the other side.

Sadly there are many people living around this Cathedral in need of shelter – someone is sleeping on College Green as I speak. Over the coming weeks we will be offering hospitality in the form of an occasional night shelter. This is an important part of our Christian ministry and is something we should be doing. But putting oneself out for other people doesn't have to mean putting them up, this isn't always practical and in our privileged society although there are undoubtedly too many homeless living on our streets, there are also many more who are deprived of other basics essential to human flourishing – love, companionship and faith. Being alongside these people, putting ourselves out for them, has to be part of our ministry too. Fortunately, we do see acts of kindness here every day: lifts are offered to those who find it hard to get to the Cathedral, choirs enable others to worship, through beautiful music and singing. Floors are swept and kept clean to prevent slipping. Hospitality is

offered through coffee, breakfasts, lunches and many other events. The sick and lonely are visited.

This list of loving service brings to mind the final verse of the 19th century Christina Rossetti's carol *In the Bleak Midwinter* which we've sung so many times over the past few weeks:

What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise man, I would do my part; yet what I can I give him, Give my heart.

The innkeeper found a space for Mary to give birth to her Son, the infant Christ; every day we encounter Christ in the face of the homeless, the unloved, the sick and we try to find space in our hearts for all those in need. Yet with the best of intentions we're too busy, our Christmas preparations have tired us out, we find excuses, we frequently fail – that of course is part of the human condition.

The great 17th century priest and poet George Herbert in his poem *Christmas, I*, describes someone who is quite exhausted by the excess of pleasure, much as we all might feel at this time of year. As Malcolm Guite writes of *Christmas 1*, the subject of this poem isn't at all devout, he's a person who is simply 'riding after all pleasures' and not seeking to put the Christ back into Christmas. I'll read it in a moment, but the great thing about this poem is that an exhausted rider comes to Christ, quite accidentally and unintentionally, just putting up at the nearest inn, only to find that all this time Christ has been expecting him with the full and ancient sense of *expectio*: that is to say, 'looking out' for him. It's one thing for us to choose the time it suits us to turn to Christ, it's quite another to discover that all the time he is beholding and expecting us, patiently awaiting our arrival. *Christmas 1*:

*After all pleasures as I rid one day,
My horse and I, both tired, body and mind,
With full cry of affections, quite astray;*

I took up the next inn I could find.

*There when I came, whom found I but my dear,
My dearest Lord, expecting till the grief
Of pleasures brought me to Him, ready there
To be all passengers' most sweet relief?*

*Oh Thou, whose glorious, yet contracted light,
Wrapt in night's mantle, stole into a manger;
Since my dark soul and brutish is Thy right,
To man of all beasts be not Thou a stranger:*

*Furnish and deck my soul, that Thou mayst have
A better lodging, than a rack, or grave.*

This poem reassures us that however tired we are, however unworthy, however unready and however hard we may find it to believe, Christ is waiting for us, looking out for us, ready to forgive, ready to love. The poem ends with a final twist, in the final lines Herbert turns the tables and invites Christ as a guest into his soul, even though he knows that Christ himself must furnish it.

This invitation to Christ to come into our lives takes us back to our innkeeper, making space by inviting the Holy Family to shelter in his stable in Bethlehem, so offering the infant Christ a safe lodging, in a manger. Amen.