

Reflection for Midnight Mass 2021

The Christmas story is so familiar to us: Mary, Joseph, Bethlehem, the shepherds, a star, and the three wise men. We know that there was no room at the inn. We know that Jesus was laid in a manger. We also know that a manger is no place for a baby. It is a container for the hay that animals eat. A baby needs a crib, or a bed, somewhere safe and clean and warm. A manger was no place to lay a baby. This was no place for the newly born Messiah. This was God's first night as one of us. God had entered his world as flesh and blood. Heaven and earth, God and humanity, the pure and the profane had come together in Jesus – lying in an animal's feeding trough. In the book of Genesis God said that creation was good and at Christmas he proved it. The mystery, the wonder of the Incarnation is that God had become human flesh.

*Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.*

So tonight, as we remember that God was laid in a manger, we also remember how this came about. We remember that when Mary and Joseph got to the inn, they were told there was no room for them there.

I sometimes wonder if the inn was really full. Have you ever wondered if perhaps there was actually some room in the inn? Maybe the innkeeper had a couple rooms left. But when he saw this unmarried couple with this woman who was obviously pregnant, perhaps he decided he didn't want to let out a room to them. But, we might think, even if there weren't any rooms left, surely he could have found somewhere safe and quiet and private for a woman who was nine months pregnant and about to give birth?

But he didn't. And so Jesus wasn't born in the inn. He was born in the stable and laid in a manger. Those of you who have been to Bethlehem will know that a church has been built over the very spot where Jesus was said to have been born: the Church of the Nativity. It helps us remember that the message of the angels was not just a message for the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, but a message for us all. The angel's message is one that comes down the centuries and burns in our minds and our hearts this night. 'Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'

But there's something that we don't know: we don't know the name of the inn. Was it the Bethlehem Hotel? The Star and Shepherd? The Angel? The Kings Arms? We'll never know. Whatever it was called, I sometimes wonder if the innkeeper ever realized who he had turned away. I wonder if a few years later he regretted that when Mary had come to the door, he hadn't given her a room, only some hay.

But this isn't really a story about an innkeeper who missed a chance to open the doors to Christ over 2000 years ago, or at least not *only* that. This is about what God did, and what God still does. And it's about what we do today.

Christ still comes into this world. Christmas still happens. It didn't just happen once; it happens all the time.

Sometimes God knocks at our doors, and we are asked if there is room in our lives for him. We are asked if there is room in our heart, in our home, in our lives for Jesus. And sometimes we look out and we don't like what we see. We don't like what we think it would mean to let Christ in, and we close the door and say "there's no place for you here".

Christmas isn't just about Mary and Joseph and the baby and the manger and no room at the inn. Christmas is about us. It is about opening ourselves up to what God is trying to do in us today. And it's about telling God that, even if we don't fully know what it means, there is room for God in our lives, and we want to be part of what God is doing. Christmas invites us to be part of the story. I have a picture of my niece, when she was little, standing a living nativity scene - standing next to Mary and Joseph and the angels and the shepherds. Standing looking down at the baby Jesus. The picture demonstrates perfectly what God does. He calls us to be part of the story.

God is still speaking to us today. And not only is he still speaking, but he is active in his world today. God is still writing the Christmas story. That story tells of Jesus coming into this world as Saviour and Prince of Peace. And we can be a part of that story.

The innkeeper will undoubtedly be remembered as the person who closed his doors when God came knocking. So we need to learn from that. When God knocks on the door of our life we need to answer, joyfully, willingly and readily and invite him to come in and stay.

When the shepherds out in the fields heard that the baby had been born, they got up and hurried to Bethlehem to see what had happened, what this thing was that the Lord had told them about. So, they came to the manger and looked down and saw that God had come into his world.

That's what I want to do on Christmas Eve, and what I wish I had the courage and faith to do every day. I don't want to be someone who closes my heart to the message and call of God. I want to be someone who hears what God is doing and comes running. When God works in this world, I would like to have the love, and courage to want to be a part of that story – not just occasionally, but every time. Like the shepherds I want to be a part of the story.

And the good news of Christmas is that I can be. And so can you. We all can be part of the story.

When the tree is taken down, when the mince pies have been eaten, when the decorations and the nativity sets go back into their boxes, the love and peace of Jesus is still here. The real test of how well we have celebrated Christmas this year will not be in the presents we have given or received, in the things that we can see or the things we can hold in our hands. The real test of Christmas is whether we have opened our hearts to Jesus, and let his love fill us, forgive us and change us. May that be something we do this Christmas, and always. Amen.