

**'In a manger'. Bethesda Meditation. 16 December 2007.**

Hymn :

Lo, within in a manger lies  
He who built the starry skies;  
He who, throned in height sublime,  
Sits amid the cherubim.

Sacred Infant, all divine,  
How your love and mercy shine,  
Coming from the highest bliss  
Down to such a world as this!

*Hail, O ever blessèd morn!  
Hail, redemption's happy dawn!  
Sing through all Jerusalem:  
'Christ is born in Bethlehem'.<sup>1</sup>*

Our reading this morning comes from Luke chapter 2 – beginning at verse 1 :

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.*

Verses 4-13a :

*And Joseph went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.*

*And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn (or 'in the guestroom').*

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God ... .*

Verses 15-16 :

*When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which has happened, which the Lord has made known to us. And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.*

As we have read, our Lord's birth brought, not only *Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem*, not only a *multitude of angels from heaven to earth*, but a *company of shepherds from the fields to a manger*.

And I want to focus this morning on the expression which occurs three times in my reading. It is the simple phrase 'in a manger'.<sup>2</sup>

But, alas for *us*, our very familiarity with the Christmas story easily robs us of that sense of wonder and astonishment which *should* grip our hearts – that the One who is indeed 'Christ the Lord' should ever have been found lying in such a place.

I should like to share with you two quotes which have come my way over the past few days. The first comes from a young boy, six years of age, who is in our daughter Susanna's class at St Brides Major Primary School. On Tuesday, Susanna's class are to stage a Nativity play, the script for which *they* have (with Susanna's help) written themselves. Young Conor, who comes from a non-Christian home, takes the part of one of the shepherds, and, when asked to suggest what *his* shepherd might have said, offered, unprompted, 'But why should the Saviour be in a manger? I should have expected Him to be born in a palace'.

Our preacher last Lord's day was Mr. Roger Chilvers from Gloucester. And my second quote comes – no, not from Mr Chilvers – but from *another* preacher – one of England's greatest preachers<sup>3</sup> – who came from Gloucester – indeed who was born there. Today is the 16<sup>th</sup> December – and it was 283 years ago *to the day* that George Whitefield was born at the Bell Inn at Gloucester.

Listen to an extract from one of Mr. Whitefield's surviving sermons: 'Christ came, made of a woman ... *not in glory or in splendour ... no, He was ... laid in a manger*'. 'O amazing condescension of the Lord Jesus Christ', Mr. Whitefield added, 'to stoop to such low and poor things for our sake. What love is this, what great and wonderful love is here, that the Son of God should come into our world in so mean a condition'.

Clearly young Conor and Gloucester's greatest preacher shared something of the same sense of awe and amazement that the Lord Jesus should choose to be born where He was – and, as a Baby, to be laid where He was – 'in a manger' – that He should choose to be laid in an animals' feeding-trough.

We have no way of knowing where the manger was. There is a tradition – which can be traced back to the middle of the second century – that it was located in a cave.<sup>4</sup>

But a very good case can be made for *translating* the latter part of verse 7, 'she ... laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them *in the guestroom*', and for *understanding* the passage as telling us that Mary and Joseph were staying in the home of relatives or friends at Bethlehem, but that, because the house was crowded on account of the census, there was no available space for them in 'the guest room' – and so they were accommodated in the main family room. It was usual for such rooms to be divided into two parts – the floor level for the family's animals, and a raised section where the family lived. Stone feeding-troughs were often located at the approach to the raised platform – and it could well be that it was in such a manger that Mary laid her child.<sup>5</sup>

We cannot know for sure.

But what I want us to get hold of this morning is that, wherever it was located, the manger was just that, *a manger* – an animal's rough feeding trough – and whether it was made from stone, made from clay mixed with straw, or hewn out of the rock wall of a cave matters little – if at all.<sup>6</sup> For what matters to us is *not* where the manger was – or of *what it was made* – but *who* was lying in it that day.

And who was it lay in this manger? This was the One of whom the prophet Micah wrote, telling us that out of Bethlehem would come, and I quote, 'One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting (literally 'from the days of eternity')', Mic. 5. 2. As we noted recently in our evening studies, the apostle John commences his gospel by telling us, 'In the beginning was the Word'. But here we see Him, not '*in the beginning*', but '*in a manger*'.

Who was it lay in this manger? As we noted again from John 1, 'all things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made', John 1. 3 – including, of course, ultimately the materials from which His very manger was formed. Well did we sing just now the words of Edward Caswall, 'Lowly in a manger lies *He who built the starry skies*'. For He did – every last star.

Who was it lay in this manger? The One of whom Solomon once said in prayer, 'Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain you', 1 Kings 8. 27. Yet see Him now – contained in a trough some three feet long, eighteen inches wide and two feet deep.<sup>7</sup>

Who was it lay in this manger? The One who claimed through the psalmist, 'every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills', Psa. 50. 10, and of whom another psalmist wrote that He 'makes grass to grow on the mountains. He gives to the beast its food', Psa. 147. 8-9. But now He Himself lies in an animal's feeding trough.

Who was it lay in this manger? The One of whom Isaiah wrote in chapter 9 of his prophecy, 'unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given ... and his name is called Wonderful Counsellor, *Mighty God*, Father of Eternity, Prince of Peace', Isa. 9. 6 JND. Yes, the 'Mighty God' indeed. Well does Mr. Wesley's carol assert, 'Veiled in flesh the Godhead see. Hail, the incarnate Deity'!

Who was it lay in this manger? Again with my eye on the prophecy of Isaiah – this time the opening of chapter six – the One who had exchanged the glorious throne of the Lord of hosts for this dingy feeding trough<sup>8</sup> – and who had exchanged the worship of countless seraphim for the visit of some unnamed shepherds.

'While they were there', we read, 'the time came for her (Mary) to be delivered' – delivered *of* her firstborn son, that is ... but one day Mary would be – as *we* have been – delivered *by* Him. For He had come not only to *lie in a manger* but to *die on a cross*. In the well-known words of the apostle Paul, 'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet *for your sakes* He became poor (became abjectly poor), that you *through His poverty* might become rich', 2 Cor. 8. 9.

Boaz, one of our Lord's ancestors who had lived in Bethlehem over 1,100 years before, was described as 'a mighty man of wealth'<sup>9</sup>, but *his* wealth was as nothing in comparison to the riches which our Lord surrendered for us – and, as we have read, He, our Lord Jesus, was born in the very poorest of circumstances. It was said of the kings of Midian who lived at roughly the same time as Boaz that they wore 'purple garments'<sup>10</sup>. But He who was, in the words of the wise men, 'born *king*'<sup>11</sup> was wrapped in no purple ... wrapped in no fine royal linen ... but rather in simple swaddling cloths.

And, remember, this was He to whom the psalmist prayed, 'You are clothed with honour and majesty, who cover yourself with light as with a garment', Psa. 104. 1.

This was He who, in Job 38, described the origin of the sea in poetic language as its bursting forth from the womb, and who spoke then of making 'the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling cloths', Job 38. 8-9.

Behold Him now – Himself wrapped in swaddling cloths! Yes, the Lord of hosts Himself had exchanged the royal robe of heaven for swaddling cloths!

As we meet to remember our Lord this morning, we might like to recall the question of six-year old Conor from Susanna's class, 'But why should the Saviour be in a manger? I should have expected Him to be born in a palace'.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Edward Caswall (1814–1878).

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2. 7, 12, 16. Clearly the fact that this unique Babe lay in a rough feeding-trough for animals had significance, not only for the angel-evangelist and for the shepherds of Bethlehem, but for the writer of the Gospel. 'This surprising emphasis shows that ... great importance was attached to the concept', TDNT, volume IX, page 53.

<sup>3</sup> It has been estimated that, in 34 years, Mr. Whitefield preached more than 18,000 times. 'At a time when London had a population of less than 700,000, he could hold spellbound 20,000 people at a time at Moorfields and Kennington Common'.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, LXXIX, and 'The *Protoevangelium of James*', 17:3–18:1.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the word rendered '*inn*' in Luke 2. 7 by many translations is the same as occurs in Luke 22. 11 : 'He said to them, Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters and tell the master of the house, The Teacher says to you, where is *the guest room*, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?', Luke 22. 10-11. Apart from the parallel account in Mark 14. 14, it is not found elsewhere in the New Testament. (The word Luke uses in chapter 10 to describe the inn between Jerusalem and Jericho (having an innkeeper) is different. The word of Luke 2. 7 is also used often outside the New Testament of a guest-room rather than of an inn. Indeed, we may doubt whether there would have been a commercial inn at Bethlehem in Jesus' day as Bethlehem was not on any major road, and inns normally were to be found then only on major roads, especially Roman roads. Although Jeremiah 41. 17 may well indicate that there was some such lodging place there back in Jeremiah's day.

In the vast majority of ancient Near-Eastern peasant homes for which we have archaeological and literary evidence, the manger was inside the home, not in some separate location. The animals as well as the family slept within one large enclosed space which was divided in such a way that usually the animals would be on a lower level, and the family would sleep on a raised dais.

Shepherds were near the bottom of the social ladder, and, indeed, their profession was declared unclean by some of their rabbis. They would have felt uncomfortable and unwelcome in many homes. But they knew that they would face no humiliation as they visit *this* Child – for *He* is laid in a manger. That is, He is born in a simple peasant home, with a manger in the family room. Armed with this assurance they go with haste.

For archaeological and historical data, see TDNT, volume IX, page 52, and the excellent article by Kenneth E. Bailey, 'The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7' in 'The Theological Review' (November 1979), reprinted in 'The Evangelical Review of Theology', volume 4, 1980, page 200ff.

<sup>6</sup> We do not know whether it was even lined with hay or straw.

<sup>7</sup> Archaeologists have discovered mangers in the region 'cut out of limestone' with these dimensions.

<sup>8</sup> 'What kind of King would leave His throne  
In Heaven to make this earth His home?  
While men seek fame and great renown  
In lowliness our King comes down'. *Julie Miller.*

<sup>9</sup> Ruth 2. 1 (KJV).

<sup>10</sup> Judg. 8. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Matt. 2. 2.