

Luke 2, 15-21

27th December 2020

May I speak in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Our gospel reading today is such a familiar passage we could be forgiven for thinking “I know this!” I was stunned to discover that I did not know it, I knew of it, and I guess that may be the same for all of us. This proves the urgency for us in these uncertain, unsettling times to open our Bibles and read with open hearts and mind and with the humility to accept that we could be wrong about events we have never questioned.

A lot of adults only exposure to the Bible story of the Nativity is through a school nativity play. They are hard work for the teachers, for the support staff who move stages, and kit the children out in all their costumes, but they are invaluable in getting over the message that “Christ, the Saviour, is born” and they are very moving.

Something about seeing a small child in a cut-down old sheet with tinsel round their hair gets the old eyes pricking with tears in a way that nothing else can.

We do ourselves a great dis-service and I would suggest, lay ourselves open to spiritual danger, when our only experience of the Bible is through nativity plays, films, or any medium other than the Bible itself.

We know Mary and Joseph were engaged,

We know Mary was pregnant

Joseph knew the baby wasn't his and wasn't very happy with the situation until an Angel appeared to him in a dream.

With every single Bible story, there are a lot of details we are not given. Perhaps this is the Holy Spirit's way of getting us to think things through. It is logical to assume that Mary's family were not exactly supportive of Mary being pregnant outside marriage and claiming she had conceived when an Angel visited her and spoke

certain words over her. It would be interesting to know the Aramaic for “pull the other one, I wasn’t born yesterday!” We know that Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth, knew the truth, but she had her own home, and was not living with Mary’s family.

We are not told of any friends that Joseph may have had. Did he have someone to turn to? Did he confide to his rabbi the struggles he was having? Again, we are not told, but it seems logical to assume that any man, in those days, with a pregnant fiancée would run a gauntlet of responses from ribald humour to reprimand. I think it is likely, that, in Josephs’ home town, amongst his family members, arriving home with a pregnant fiancée would not be cause for outrage.

So I think Mary and Joseph left for Bethlehem as soon as they know they had to go. It is a 90-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. If it took them a week, that is travelling 12 ½ miles a day, whatever trimester of pregnancy Mary was in, that’s not exactly a gentle stroll.

We know Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem and Jesus was born there. We don’t know how long they were in Bethlehem before Jesus arrived. Luke 2, 6 says “And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth” which implies time passing, but to watch a nativity play to seems like Mary only just has time to stagger into the stable before Jesus arrives.

Oh, and that’s another thing – nowhere in Luke or Matthew is a stable mentioned. Jesus was laid in A manger, because there was no room in THE Inn, THE Inn implying that there was only one inn in Bethlehem. But Joseph was in his home town, he surely had relatives that he and Mary could stay with for a while. We know the Inn was full, we do not know whether they tried to stay there and were turned away, sorry Innkeeper in the nativity play!

We know, because it is mentioned three times in Luke, that Jesus was lying in a manger. A manger is an animal feeding trough, and lined with straw, it would be warm. Neither Luke nor Matthew mention any animals being around Jesus.

Angels appear to the local shepherds and tell them “A Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord” is born, and they go to see for themselves.

Shepherds, in Bible times, had a unique social status. They were unique in that they had no status. A prisoner could speak in his own defence in a court, but it was illegal to call a shepherd as a witness. They were decidedly persona non grata. And it is to these despised men that the Angels appear. Hearing the good news, the much maligned shepherds go straight away to seek the Holy Family. It was just as the Angels said, there was the Saviour of Mankind, a baby in an animals feeding trough. The shepherds share the Angels words firstly with Mary and Joseph, then we are told “all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.” So the shepherds were both heard and believed when they spoke. Quite a step up from their previous standing, or lack of it. Before the Christ Child had spoken His first word, by seeking and finding Him, the shepherds were healed and restored from their previous life experience. They go back to work, we could say back to their old lives, but they go “Glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” Their lives were never the same again.

Now v 21 reads almost like an anti-climax. Last Sunday we were with Elizabeth and Zechariah, and Zechariah’s voice did not return until he wrote, “His name is John” when his family were disagreeing over the baby’s name.

The Saviour of the World is born, the shepherds go from having no legal voice to being heard and believed and praising God, “and at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the Angel.” No fuss, no drama, just the everyday experience of an 8-day old Jewish boy.

On Friday, Her Majesty the Queen delivered her speech which was obviously written by someone whose knowledge of Christ’s birth was taken from nativity plays. At 5 minutes 12 seconds, Her Majesty says, “The Bible tells us how a star appeared in the sky and guided shepherds and wise men to the place of Jesus birth.” Oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear.

Luke tells us the Angels told the shepherds who saw the infant lying in the manger, Matthew tells us the Wise men saw a star, approached Herod for advise and his scribes told the wise men to go to Bethlehem, where they found the house where the child was. Both shepherds and wise men found Jesus, but they weren't in the same place at the same time.

Bang goes my Dame hood!

So from the Highest in the Land to you and me, we need to open our Bibles and get stuck in, and be prepared to be challenged over things we always "knew!"

For example,

There is no mention of Mary riding on a donkey, to Bethlehem or to anyplace else.

There is no mention of Mary and Joseph being turned away from the inn, or indeed being offered a stable, because they had no vacancies.

No animals are mentioned in the nativity story.

None of the shepherds brought Jesus a lamb – and in any case, it wasn't their property to give away.

There wasn't a little drummer boy.

We do not know the exact number of the Wise Men. We do not know any of their names. We know they brought 3 gifts, and we know the significance of those gifts, but just as when our Royal Family go on a visit, they will receive gifts from the people of the country they are visiting, the 3 gifts Jesus received were not necessarily from 3 people.

I do hope I hadn't spoilt anyone's Christmas joy, because Christ the Saviour IS born, the Word WAS made flesh, and it is not wrong or un-Christian to send our friends Christmas cards with the 3 kings on, or to put out our family nativity sets with cows and sheep around baby Jesus.

What is wrong, is for us as Christians to not know what the Bible says, and to not know when we are being told or shown something Bible related that does not tie up with Scripture.

This time last year we could never have guessed what 2020 has held for us. It is probably just as well. We hope for the vaccine to be successful and to be able to hug our family and friends again in 2021.

God has promised us in his Word that “I will not leave you, or forsake you” and unless we open our Bibles and get reading, we won’t know.

I have used the English Standard Bible to prepare this homily, if anyone would like to contact me to say that they have looked up the New International Version, or the King James Version, and it says so – and - so, I would be absolutely delighted.

Our Bible study starts again on Wednesday, 6th January, 11.45 a.m. and 7.30 p.m., by zoom as before. Everyone is welcome, and if you would like to join us, please let Brian know so that we can include you in the email group list.

Merry Christmas, everybody.