

Bible Journal 24<sup>th</sup> December

It's a bit of a shock to realise that St. Luke is the only gospel writer to describe the birth of Christ. We hear the familiar words each year because there is no other version. We assume that all the gospels would relate it because it is so important, but they do not all describe the same events. The writers had different points to make. Matthew mentions Mary's pregnancy and the Magi to put Jesus in the context of Jewish history, and the fulfilment of prophecies, but Luke, Chapters 1 and 2, gives the whole story of his childhood, from the Annunciation to Jesus sitting with the doctors in the temple. It is so familiar that it hardly need re-telling, but as Robert said at St. Mary's recently, the familiar is also reliable and we needn't worry about being predictable.

To me, the appearance of the angels to the shepherds is the most interesting part of the story. I don't know why, except that we had a carol book when I was a child with the most beautiful watercolour illustrations, and the one for 'While Shepherds Watched' was the most beautiful of all. I can still see those illustrations in my mind's eye. (Thanks to the internet I now have my own copy, since my sister took ours.)

However, the recent parish pilgrimage set me thinking. We all know that 'there were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night' but I saw little sign of fields in Jordan. So I made enquiries and found that the original Greek describes the shepherds being out of doors for the night watch over the sheep. St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate says only that the shepherds were keeping night watch. The first complete English translation by Wycliffe in 1388 says the shepherds were 'waking and keeping the night watches on their flock'. It was Tyndale in 1526 who wrote that the shepherds 'were abydinge in the felde, and watching their flock by nyght', which was used almost word for word by the translators of the Authorised Version. Was this deliberate, to bring the story home to the ploughboy that Tyndale wanted to empower with an English bible? Or could he not imagine sheep at anywhere but in fields at night? In Jordan we saw them wandering about the desert hillsides with apparently hardly anything to eat. The desert is not just sand (as I always thought) but rock, with a few scrubby plants, but the sheep manage, though they are thinner and more wiry than ours, with coats of many colours. They need plenty of space to find food so presumably they range widely in the day and are gathered together at night for safety.

Does this matter? Of course not, yet for me, seeing a similar context to the Holy Land two thousand years ago brings another dimension to the story.

There is something else I discovered by reading a book called 'Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes' by Kenneth Bailey, in which he puts the Bible and Jesus's teaching into the context of

his life and times. He shows that our understanding of the birth of Jesus has been altered through mistranslation. This does matter, to an extent, and certainly spoils countless nativity plays, but the truth at the heart of the story remains – that Jesus was born in humble circumstances, in a strange place that was not his home. According to Bailey, the rules of hospitality in the Middle East (or anywhere else) would never have allowed a heavily pregnant woman to lodge in a stable. Also, Joseph's family was from Bethlehem and there would be many of his kin there who would welcome them. Again, one word is important. We all know 'there was no room for them in the inn' but what was an inn? Luke was using a Greek word that meant 'the guest room of the house', but this distinction was lost on later English translators. The sort of house Jesus was born in had two rooms: one for the family and one for guests. It was the guest room which was full, so Mary and Joseph were accommodated with the family. At the end of this room was a lower area where the animals were kept overnight. Often there were mangers hollowed out of the floor of the living room, so the animals could lean over and eat. There could also have been a wooden structure, familiar to western Europeans: both would be fine for a temporary cradle. Again, Wycliffe stayed near to the original by saying that 'there was no place to Him in no chamber'. Tyndale says 'there was no room for them within, in the hostrey'. (I don't know what he understood or meant by that word.)

So, we must forget the surly inn-keeper, but we have gained the ox and ass. They are not mentioned in the Bible but would certainly have been there, perhaps with a few sheep. So, is the familiar reliable here? Perhaps not quite, but the essence of the story remains. As a seeker after historical truth, I find the story is enhanced by knowing what really happened (or what probably happened) but Jesus, Mary and Joseph remain a simple family, homeless in a difficult situation which has had tremendous repercussions for over two thousand years.

Mary Alexander, December 2011.