

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Christmas Eve – 24th December 2021

Aix-en-Provence

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Christmas is here again, whether we are ready or not! Even those who profess not to believe in Christ seem to have no difficulty in taking a holiday, meeting up with friends and family, eating and drinking special meals, partying and giving gifts. Magazines are full of advice for the exhausted, tired out by the work involved in all this frivolity and emphasis on togetherness and enjoyment. It's a time of huge family pressure, leading to arguments and strife, and forced niceness to people one doesn't actually like very much can add to the tensions.

A far cry from the story of Christ's birth, where his parents are forced to travel a long way from family and home, just as Mary is due to give birth. Bureaucracy rode roughshod over family matters even 2000 years ago, as the Roman emperor decided he needed to reform the tax system and thus unknowingly fulfilled the prophecy made years before, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

It's here that our popular Nativity story veers away from the Gospel, and is brightly coloured by our well known and much loved carols. Our cribs that we have at home and in church, with all the animals in the stable, are lovely. But Luke just says that while they were there, Mary had her baby and wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them. There's no mention of an inn – Bethlehem was too small to have an inn. There's no mention of the animals, just the manger, appropriated by Mary as a cot. Many of the houses then would have kept their animals in the undercroft, an early form of underfloor heating for the family living above. It would have been a warm, safe place, but there's no reason to believe that Mary and Joseph were in there along with the animals. We have a number of mangers for our sheep and cows. They range from metal baskets that clip to the wall, to

sturdy wooden arrangements on legs. Nice fresh hay and a blanket over the top (hay is scratchy stuff) and they would make a safe and cosy cot.

But it's hardly 5 star luxury for this special child's arrival into the world. A makeshift cot, no proper lodging, humble parents far from home, no female relatives at hand to help the young mother. We can only hope that either Joseph knew what to do and help her, or some kindly lady from the village was at hand.

And continuing this theme of humble beginnings, the first people to be told about this holy baby were shepherds out in the fields guarding their sheep through the night. Not the aristocracy, the governors and emperors, the smart and wealthy people. Working farmers, guarding their precious flocks from prowling wolves, bears and thieves. They wouldn't have been welcomed in a wealthy household, mucky, unwashed and reeking of sheep. Which is an acquired taste to say the least. But without them, stock losses would have been crippling. We have wolves at home – we saw one not 200 metres from a friend's house last week, and they can decimate a flock, inflicting horrific injuries on defenceless animals and killing them. So shepherds were and are vital, but they wouldn't be most people's first choice of early visitors to see their new baby. But this baby has come to be the ultimate shepherd. He won't spend his time with the glitterati, he's going to be with his sheep, his people, protecting, caring and leading them away from harm and into the light.

It's a mark of how faithful those shepherds were that once they got over the shock of seeing the angels, they dropped everything and went into the village to see this baby. They had nothing to give other than their admiration and belief in him but it's not every day that God shows his power to people in such a way – these men and boys saw not one angel but “a vast host of others – the armies of heaven”. It must have been terrifying. There you are, in the dark, listening out for your dogs barking to alert you to threats, when the whole area is lit up by an angel, then hordes of angels. No wonder they left their flocks and shot off into the village, risking losing their animals and possibly their jobs, but seized by the news that the Messiah has finally arrived. They knew their scripture, they like the rest of Israel had been waiting a long time for their saviour to arrive.

And now the significance of the manger comes into play. A shepherd knows exactly what a manger is and what it looks like – and that was the sign the angel

gave them. A sign familiar to a shepherd. A baby wrapped in strips of cloth was a much loved and well cared for baby, a sight very much at odds with one lying in a manger. But this baby will not be what people expect. He won't be a great military leader, or a politician, or an emperor like Augustus, born into an elite family, related to Julius Caesar and named by him as his successor. Augustus fought his way to the top and declared himself Emperor and by association with Caesar declared himself divine, paving the way for all sorts of resistance and complications with people who worshipped God. But he was a great Roman ruler – he brought in the Pax Romana, an unheard of two centuries of peace in the Mediterranean, enlarged Rome's rule and brought in roads, new tax systems, and strong government.

What a contrast between Augustus and Jesus. The people of Israel were looking forward to a man like Augustus, but one of them, to lead them into freedom and save them from the oppression of so many neighbours who over the years had invaded them. Instead their saviour was a little boy, born to a carpenter and his wife far from home and visited by shepherds. God's idea of a saviour, a Messiah, wasn't what people expected. But he would grow up to be the saviour of the whole of humanity, if only they would welcome him. His was not to be the way of the sword, of the great military commander, but of teaching a gentler, kinder way of living, with miraculous powers of healing and a warm welcome to all, regardless of their background or way of life. He came to be a shepherd of his people.

A good shepherd cares for his flock, lives with them night and day, feeds them, nurses them, and protects them from those who mean them harm. His sheep will follow him anywhere, crowd round him to be fed.

If Christ is our shepherd, then how much more should we follow him than do sheep their shepherd? How much more should we clamour to be fed by him, spiritually and inwardly, how much more should we be eager to be with him always? How much do we rely on our shepherd to rescue us when we are in trouble, to lead us through life and help us avoid all the pitfalls?

But that's in the future for our baby in the manger tonight. Tonight he can rest secure in the love of his mother, cosy in his make do crib, admired and worshipped by the poor and humble. Greatness will come, but for now he can

doze and rest content. As we marvel at the wonder of this nativity, let's not forget the real meaning of Christmas. As John Betjeman put it

“And is it true? And is it true,....

The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me?”

Amen.