

Luke 2:1-20  
26.12.10  
Caversham Baptist

### The Trinity in the Nativity

As we reflect on the Father as creator, of even rata trees, the One who creates views and scenery that causes us to be in awe, and who sent His Son to earth, I get the picture of a great planner, a careful tactician, whose timing is perfect, someone I can be in awe of. And then I get to nativity, the story of Jesus' birth and there seems chaos, late arrivals, panic. It doesn't seem to fit.

It appears that there's been a lot left up to chance. I just find it inconceivable that the Father or Holy Spirit would leave Joseph and Mary to make their own way from Nazareth to Bethlehem on their own and in their own time.

Why do we have this belief that they arrive in Bethlehem, with Mary in labour, at the dead of night with everything shut up and the innkeeper saying, you're too late, oh all right, use the stables around the back. It sounds like God is out of control rather than in control. I find it embarrassing, aren't I meant to be in awe of this?

Diane and I were driving the Great Ocean road somewhere between Melbourne and Adelaide two years ago. We needed a camping ground to stay the night and when we got to the one we'd hoped to stay at, at 7:30 it was closed for the night, locked up tight, no one would answer the phone or door. A sign said closed at 7, and closed at 7 it was. How were we supposed to know? We were stuck.

We had passed what looked like a derelict DoC camp ground a few k's back so back there we went. Looks can be deceiving, inside the facilities were wonderful, and we pitched the tent within metres of the beach! It couldn't have been better.

And then the DoC ranger said casually, did you see the koalas? Well in that light we probably would have thought they were possums! Just across the road were two koalas in a bush almost close enough to touch. What a blessing! This is how God works! We gave thanks to God for guiding us, more specifically to the Holy Spirit for guiding us, which begs the question at this time of the year, if the Holy Spirit would guide us like this, how much more would He guide Mary and Joseph?

The belief that Joseph and Mary arrive looking for a place to stay makes Joseph look a proper twit, an incompetent father and not a very caring or intelligent husband to expect his 39 and six seventh week pregnant wife to travel for a week the 100+ kilometres. What's worse this makes us pity them, not be in awe of them.

As you might be able to tell this has been bothering me! Fortunately one of the best people who has studied these times Kenneth Bailey, and for only 40 years, has written about how it all most likely happened. There's an article here if you'd like to read it or if you'd like it emailed, I can give you the link.

You see we view the nativity from our time and from our culture. One or two things have changed since Jesus was born so you'd expect here might be some misunderstanding. Bailey points us back to the Bible, which warmed my heart, to the first seven verses in Luke chapter 2.

1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while[a] Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Note verse four, they went up to Bethlehem, doesn't this assume they have arrived, that they were already there, not that they were about to go? This leads us well into verse six 'while they were there' which challenges the stories we've read to children and some carols we've sung. They if they were there in plenty of time to have the baby.

So, ok, why then was Joseph so slow in finding a birthing place, was he too busy catching up with family? Which is another valuable point, why did Joseph go to Bethlehem, the Census, wouldn't that mean a huge family gathering or reunion? Why would they stay at an inn? We might, but this would be unthinkable to Palestinians, in fact it would be an insult not to stay with relatives! Family is so important, it's as strong as Maori people's link to the marae, very similar. Joseph and Mary far from being troubled as to where they might stay would have been most welcome, especially with Mary being pregnant.

So where does the notion of the inn come from? The word in the original text - kataluma - can be translated inn, but also four other ways. What did Luke mean? It's worth noting that a few chapters later (10:34) he again mentions an inn, in the parable of the good Samaritan but this time uses another word.

So what would the early listeners have understood when they heard kataluma, certainly not inn, because commercial inns were only found on major trade routes, and Bethlehem wasn't on one. It is more likely they were in a house, with family. A house that has a single room with a platform at one end where people would sleep, because lower down their animals were brought in for the night much the same as us putting our cars in the garage at night.

Why didn't they leave the stock outside, well they served a purpose at night too, central heating, the stock helped keep the houses warm. And it also prevented them from being stolen.

And so 1. Joseph and Mary arrive in plenty of time to a 2. family reunion where they are 3. most welcome and 4. stay in a house with many other guests.

And then the time comes for the baby to be born. What would you do - find a private place? We surely would not want to have a public birth, so we'd find somewhere private, like stables. But, in Palestinian culture to be alone is unspeakably painful. To have all these people around would have been a blessing, that they were family as well a double blessing. The Census far from a nuisance couldn't have come at a better time. Isn't God good!

And where did people have babies back then, not in a birthing unit, in a house. So with many guests around, oh dear what to do? What does the Bible say?

Verse 7 “And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger.” To quote Bailey, “The (Palestinian) reader instinctively thinks, “Manger—oh—they are in the main family room. Why not the guest room?” The author instinctively replies, “Because there was no place for them in the guest room.” The reader concludes, “Ah, yes—well, the family room is more appropriate anyway.” Thus, with the translation “guest room, [and not inn]” all of the cultural, historical and linguistic pieces fall into place.’

To the Palestinian reader or listener, all this makes perfect sense. With our desire for privacy, technology, respectability, our way of doing things, this quite beautiful story has been adjusted to,.... fit us.

Finally, because Jesus was born here, He was accessible to all even lonely shepherds. They never would have got into a palace. Jesus reveals at His birth that God is for all people, not exclusion, not just for the rich and famous, not for the wealthy, yes, them and us, and the lowest in our society too, who were the shepherds then. That the maji came to worship reinforces Jesus accessibility to all and I can be in awe of that.

So, what’s my point? As I look at creation I can be in awe of a Creator. When I look at what Jesus did for me I can be in awe, it is stunningly amazing. But when I look at the popular version of the nativity, with Joseph’s apparent incompetence, it looks a mess, chaos, embarrassing. But it wasn’t! It is amazing when time is taken to look at how it would have happened in Palestine, not in the context of London, Sydney or Dunedin.

God is stunningly amazing, and you can see that in the Trinity at the Nativity.