

# A THING FOR ADVENT

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## No Room At This Inn

The translators of the Bible down the ages have served us badly and well by turns. I find it hard to forgive the translation of the Lord's Prayer we are left with. I suppose if we had it withdrawn there would be a fearful row, with people accusing the Bishops of being in the grip of the devil, etc. But really, the translation we use isn't the Lord's Prayer, and it's possible to say our version in a very different sense from that which the Greek words mean.

If our most widely-known Christian prayer is distorted, then so are the most popular stories in the New Testament: the Christmas stories. Those who, like me, find it disappointing that Christmas is more precious to many people than Easter, can blame the spectacular skills of two Evangelists (Matt and Luke) for their two superb, and quite irreconcilable, birth stories.

It's always instructive to look into these fascinating stories with the help of some good scholarship, and to separate out the *real* meaning of what is said in each of the two accounts. The difference between them is thorough-going, and represents two separate intentions. What is revealing in this exercise, to my mind, is the marvellous way in which the birth-story in either Gospel is really the *Easter* story - in a very thin disguise.

The Christmas-card manufacturers have done their best to eliminate the differences between the two stories. They act within a long Church tradition: as long ago as 150 AD Tatian was composing his *Diatesseron*, a porridge made of the four gospels. With scissors and paste, he laid all four texts into a single narrative. Where they speak identically, he overlaid them. Where they differ, even in a tiny detail, he made them consecutive. He ended up with one long Gospel; but at what a price! All the careful theology of the separate documents was mashed together in a babble of words. What Tatian had produced was a Disharmony of the Gospels.

In the same way, in our old master paintings we find Matthew's star shining on Luke's manger, Matthew's magi rubbing shoulders with Luke's shepherds, and so on. The mix is meant to cope with the differences between the two accounts; it results in an inconsistency and lumpiness, with big bubbles of space, into which sentimentality rushes with its theories - helped on by the inadequacy of the translation. For instance, the much-loved theme of Mary and Joseph turned out of their homes and made to go on a long journey by the Roman emperor, just when every girl wants to have her baby quietly at home, *is not part of the Gospel account*. It would never occur to Luke to draw Mary and Joseph as a little persecuted family thrown on life's surge. He simply knows he's got to get them from Nazareth (in Galilee, where Jesus' accent proclaims him to have been brought up) to Bethlehem (where Micah says the Messiah is going to be born) and back again. That it should be a decree of Caesar (master of the Gentile world) that brings the Word of God to fulfilment, is entirely in keeping with the tradition of Isaiah, where the pagan Cyrus is called "the anointed of the Lord" (= *messiah*) because, without knowing the God of Israel, he releases the people of God from their exile, and returns them to the Promised Land. In the same way, Caesar Augustus is depicted as a co-operator - all unknowing - in the plan of God. There is no room for them, says Luke, to have a child *in the living-accommodation* - that is, in the living rooms (Gk *katalyma*) of the house where they are staying. This is not surprising; in a crowded town full of displaced persons, it is obviously going to be a busy time. So room is made for them to be put up in the stabling accommodation - on the lower floor of the house, where they can be quiet, and warm, and have plenty of room: and, most importantly, where *the child can be laid in a manger amongst animals*; the first page of Isaiah complains of Israel that, in religious terms, it is worse than an animal, since

*The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's manger;*

*but Israel does not know; my people does not understand*

Luke's story is of a new beginning, a new covenant, a New Testament if you like, where this complaint against Israel is to be reversed. Therefore the nativity-scene is not to be thought of as set in a cold shed at the back of an unwelcoming pub, but *quite the reverse*; Jesus finds a warm welcome in a quiet place, with loving parents, and there, where the ox and donkey show the way to recognition, the shepherds - the poor people of the hills of Judaea - will come and recognise the sign which the Lord has given them, the baby lying in the manger.

The real villain in this piece, which turns the Gospel into an advert for Shelter, is the translation of that *living-accommodation* into *inn*. The point is that Luke knows perfectly well how to say *inn*; he has it in his own parable of the good Samaritan, where the mugged traveller is taken to an inn (Gk *pandocheion*) and given into the care of an innkeeper (*pandocheios*), both accurately given their full Greek names. Here he says that Jesus is not only installed in a manger, but swaddled also - evoking in just the same way twin concepts: motherly care, looking after him closely and accurately - he was lovingly wrapped - and also *royalty*: because the voice of Solomon, in the book of Wisdom (7:4) says:

*I too am mortal like everyone else, a descendant of the first man formed from the earth, modelled in flesh in my mother's womb...I too when I was born fell to the same ground that bears us all, and crying was the first sound I made, like all others; I was nurtured in swaddling-clothes, with every care, and no king has known any other beginning of existence: for there is only one way into the world, and one way out of it.*

Thus the swaddling-clothes take on a quite specific significance: like Solomon, Jesus is born onto the same earth that bears us all: his being born as an ordinary human child is no prejudice to his vocation to bring divine wisdom into the world, and his swaddling-clothes represent his community, not only with mankind as a whole (Luke is describing the Incarnation) but with Solomon, wisest and most royal of the children of men. This makes sense of the fact that the shepherds' vision of "a multitude of the heavenly host", with its overwhelming angelic heraldry, culminates in a message which *appears* to concern an animal's dinner-tray and a baby's nappy.

*This shall be a sign to you: you will find the child wrapped in swaddling-clothes and lying in a manger*

It takes a trained eye to read this sign. The untrained eye simply reads: *manger* = *stable* (perhaps the shepherds needed some directions in order to recognise the child, and the archangel's local geography is a bit unreliable) and *swaddling-clothes* = *babyhood* (aaah!) and concludes *birth-narrative* = *poverty* - all because *poverty* is the nearest category in our 20th-century cultural Thesaurus. In fact, the Gospels nearly always have a strictly *theological* motive for introducing unexpected words and phrases, particularly when these are framed in archangelic press-releases. We ignore them only to the detriment of the communication they are designed to bring; we make horrendous mistakes in this way about the import of our faith.

We might like to re-evaluate some other categories in this most visited of Biblical websites: for instance, *star*, *magi*, *Herod*, *Innocents*, *Egypt*, *angel*, *shepherd*, and very notably, *virgin*.