

Christmas Day- 25 December 2016

Luke 2: 1-14

No room in the inn?

Back in the seventies we lived in a single storey wooden house on a ¼ acre section. It was just like everyone else's in our street, and in most parts of New Zealand.

It wasn't until we lived in the UK that I experienced people living in rows of identical terraced houses. If you were born overseas or you've travelled abroad you'll probably agree that a very distinctive feature of a country is its housing style.

When John and I were on pilgrimage in Israel in 2007 we saw creamy plaster, flat roofed houses, which reminded me of pictures from my Sunday school days.

We learnt to distinguish between an Arab village and a Jewish kibbutz by their roof styles. Many kibbutz builders came from Germany. They built red, terracotta tiled, steeply sloping roofs, which reminded them of home.

When we visited Palestinian areas, we saw villages where nomadic Bedouins have been re-housed.

Some of them have set up black tents in the yard, thus retaining something of their cultural traditions, going back thousands of years, beyond the time of Abraham.

Another feature about those traditional Palestinian houses puzzled us.

Although they looked well established, they still had metal rods sticking up from their flat roofs, ready for another storey to be added. We wondered if they'd run out of money, or if it was a factor of living in a war zone that people felt unsettled, ready to pack up and leave at any moment?

But we were wrong.

Our guide Ibrahim explained that the house was left unfinished because it was expected that when the sons married they would bring their brides into the family home, so more rooms would be needed. What we saw as a negative was in fact a positive sign of continuity down the generations.

When I think of an inn, I imagine something Victorian: a rough, noisy place: men shouting and horses and dogs in the yard. There's a roaring fire inside, jugs of ale and a barmaid who's – well built, shall we say?

It's certainly not a welcoming place; not a suitable place for a baby to be born. I wonder if Joseph couldn't afford anything better, even if a room could be found.

We slip from one assumption to another, putting our own cultural perspective on the story, and filling in the gaps to match.

But Joseph wasn't a poor man. Last week I said he was a skilled tradesman, with valuable skills to offer. What's more, Nazareth may only have been a village but it was just over the hill from the bustling Roman-style city of Tiberius, founded shortly before Jesus' birth by Herod Antipas.

There would have been plenty of work for a carpenter.

I'm guessing here, but maybe Joseph went from Bethlehem to Nazareth for work. Hence, returning to Bethlehem would be returning home.

Remember all those nativity plays we've seen since we were young?

The innkeeper was always a key role, played by a bigger boy. It was an opportunity for a bit of comedy.

'No room' he would insist as the young couple looked miserably at him, Mary huddled in her blue cloak, Joseph pleading.

If there was a donkey involved even its head would droop with exhaustion.

Then the inn keeper would take pity and reluctantly point the young couple in the direction of the rough stable round the back.

Maybe you've heard the story of Jimmy? He'd hoped to get the part of Joseph and was a bit miffed when he was cast as the innkeeper. Reluctantly he accepted the part.

When Mary and Joseph arrive at the inn Joseph says: "*We've travelled far and are very tired. Have you any room?*"

And Jimmy the innkeeper replies: "*Yes, we've plenty of room, come on in*".

Well, it seems he might have been closer to the truth after all – a truth which has got lost in translation!

Because when Ibrahim, an Arab Christian, took us to the traditional site of Jesus' birth, he mentioned in passing that English translations of the birth narratives have got it wrong.

The word which we translate as 'Inn' really means the family guest room in one of those traditional houses.

When extended, family gathered for a special occasion, they would be housed in an upper room set aside for guests.

It would be crowded and noisy, with little privacy.

It was a hospitable gesture to offer a space to the young woman downstairs in the quarters where the animals were housed.

It would be warm, quiet, and easy for the women of the family to come and go as they assisted with the birth.

In just a few words Ibrahim recreated the entire nativity for us.

If Jesus was not born in a rough, lonely place, far from home, surrounded by strangers, but on the quiet fringes of a big family get-together, in a room apart from the communal living space; if he was nurtured and cherished, welcomed into his father's family, what message does that have for us?

Instead of running with the shepherds, to greet the new-born baby, we're the family living upstairs, amidst the bustle of a full house.

We know that a child is being born somewhere close by.

But we're busy getting on with the chores – cooking the turkey;

doing the dishes; making up beds; greeting visitors; pouring the wine.

This new way of seeing the circumstances of Jesus' birth has a message for us as church, about how we welcome people.

When we're family there's always room for one more.

We can always find space to fit everyone in, even though it's a bed on the couch, or a mattress on the floor. We can always find enough food to feed another mouth.

If we're truly the family of Christ, we will welcome all who come to us, and treat them, not just as honoured guests but as part of the family – one of us.

They won't have to earn their place, follow our rules, or wait for a space to become vacant. They'll be loved and accepted just as they are.

So this year let's forget about the grumpy old innkeeper saying: "*round the back*". He was never really there. Let's remember that family in Bethlehem, welcoming their loved ones, who've travelled many weary miles over dusty roads to come home.

Like them, this year, may we open wide our hearts with love to welcome the Christ child home. Amen

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