

# *show me the place*

a sermon preached at

*christ's mass*

25 December 2013

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, John 1:1-14

In the middle of this strangely-pregnant night – kneeling in adoration at the Christmas Crib – we might share singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen's prayer: 'Show me the place where the Word became Man'.<sup>1</sup> We come to the Crib to be shown 'the place'.

But I wonder whether the Christmas Crib can still serve its purpose. I know what it's meant to be. I do understand St Francis' momentous 13<sup>th</sup> century breakthrough – re-introducing flesh, embodiment, into a medieval world of dry scholastic church dogma – he revealed a startling and fleshy 'place' of Divine birth. But Francis could not have foreseen that the church would subsequently turn his radical idea into something so conventional, tame, and exploitable, into a historical dress-up pantomime – that it would become captive to sentimentality, nostalgia, and a 'religion of the family'. And it can't be Francis' fault that the church tells the Christmas story every year predominantly in Luke's somewhat Cecil B deMille mode.

Certainly, it would be more helpful if each of the evangelists' Christmas stories could be heard without being put into a blender. In Mark and John there might appear to be no 'place' at all!<sup>2</sup> In Matthew, on the other hand, there is a 'place' – though immediately we cannot help but notice all the missing props. Matthew knows nothing about an Emperor Augustus; no census or forced travelling across Palestine; no donkey; no inn; no child lying in a manger; no manger (!); no bands of cloth; no shepherds in fields 'washing their socks by night'; no angelic chorus in the sky; no dash across the hills to 'see this thing which has come to pass'; no sheep and cattle. All these are Luke's inventions – completely unknown to Mark, Matthew and John.

Matthew leads us to a very different place – apparently an entirely private, domestic place. In this place we have an engaged couple, an unexpected and deeply suspicious pregnancy, an honest and compassionate Jewish man. It's vital to note that Joseph's concern is to protect Mary from certain public disgrace, in the context of an Eastern shame culture and religious law.<sup>3</sup> And then we have a most interesting and significant insight – upon which the outcome of the whole story hangs. "Just when [Joseph] planned to [dismiss Mary] an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit'.<sup>4</sup>

So the place of Divine birth requires a man who is alert enough to notice his dreams – and man enough to take them seriously! "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him."<sup>5</sup> And Joseph's attention to his dreams becomes even more crucial. After the Magi have left their precious gifts, Joseph is given a somewhat darker dream – warning him of Herod's murderous intent.<sup>6</sup> Attention to this dream is the only thing that saves the newborn development

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Cohen, 'Show me the place', from the album 'Old Ideas':  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCtoVoE5Mm4>

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:1ff; John 1:1-14

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 1:19

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 1:20

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1:24

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 2:13-15

from slaughter by the reigning powers. It also results in the entire family becoming homeless, refugee, asylum seekers looking for refuge.

Is any of this gritty reality apparent at our Christmas Cribs?

The gift of Incarnation is indeed love, yes – as we are inclined to somewhat glibly declare. However, as Matthew clearly reveals, the place of Divine birth requires a Joseph-type love, characterised by honesty and courage, and an attentiveness to the Divine voice within his own soul – in order to serve the feminine, and to protect the new birth from both common scandal as well as lethal attack by the reigning powers.

So the place of reverence at Christmas *is* a joyful ‘place’, yes, but not because it gives us a warm sentimental feeling – nor by insulating us from the responsibility of growing up into the new humanity. It is our joy this night to declare that by Incarnation the Word became flesh.<sup>7</sup> And it is equally our joy this night to declare that by Incarnation the suffering of human evolution began.<sup>8</sup> Infinite divinity self-emptied into limited, frail, suffering flesh – in the service of incarnating love. The price of this Divine flesh-taking being nothing less than dying into life – the Crib, in truth, a symbol of death and resurrection.

There *is* a necessary pilgrimage to a ‘place’ of the Divine birth, then. But it’s a pilgrimage to that place which requires that we grow up – the place where ‘the Word became Man’, where the suffering of God and humanity began. This is the place of death and resurrection.

Do you see the Crib as the place of death and resurrection? Do you see the Crib as the feeding trough at which *you* participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice – as the living Body of Christ, as those who are broken bread, wine poured out, as vessels of continuing evolution? If not, then the Crib is no longer serving a positive spiritual purpose, but, a deadly regression, holding us to an infantile past – and will rightly be relegated to the irrelevant realm of dress-ups, nostalgia, and marketing.

Last week Prince Charles drew the world’s attention to the shocking and systematic persecution of Christians in the birthplace of Christianity – warning that Bethlehem itself is under threat as a place of Christian community and devotion.<sup>9</sup> But while there can be no justification for the persecution of Bethlehem Christians – just as there can be no justification for anyone’s persecution – yet these inexcusable events nevertheless illumine the problem of the historicising, concretising tendency in Christianity.

For it is a serious spiritual error to associate Bethlehem so concretely with the Divine birth. For the Word became *flesh* – not a geographic place, not a manger or a stable or an inn or a particular Palestinian town. Christianity’s concretising of the geographic location – and then taking to arms to defend it – is a betrayal of the eternal spiritual message of Incarnation, ultimately a betrayal of Christ. Moreover, to concretise this birth in sentimental Christmas Crib images and at a fixed point in time or on a map is in truth a cop out, constituting a failure to grow up. Such projections are, in truth, an attempt to spare ourselves from suffering the place of the Divine birth in our own hearts, from becoming ourselves, individually and collectively, the ‘place’ of death and resurrection, fleshy wombs of ongoing creation and evolution. The true Christmas Crib is not ‘Bethlehem in Judea’ – rather, the human heart, the Word made flesh.

We *have* been shown the place. The human heart is that ‘place’ – the birthplace of the Divine – the ‘place where the Word became Man, where the suffering began’. And this is in fact the real reason for abounding joy and angel song – and the purpose of this holy night’s pilgrimage and Eucharistic banquet.

[vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au](mailto:vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au)

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<sup>7</sup> John 1:14

<sup>8</sup> John 1:10-11; Luke 2:35; Matthew 2:13; Mark 1:8

<sup>9</sup> ‘Christianity beginning ‘to disappear’ in its birthplace, warns Prince of Wales’, cited at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/prince-charles/10524211/Christianity-beginning-to-disappear-in-its-birthplace-warns-Prince-of-Wales.html>