

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
Christmas Day, year 'A'
Sunday, December 25 2022
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

Our Christmas assumptions are—at least in part—based on a mistranslation. Last night we heard that Mary laid Jesus in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. In our culture mangers are associated with livestock, and since livestock is kept in a place some distance from where people live, we imagine that all of this took place in a stable.

But the so-called inn was nothing of the sort. In ancient Palestine, ordinary people lived in two-room houses. The front room had a kind of sunken loft at one end for the animals, which were brought inside at night and the animals would feed from some depressions in the floor of this loft end. The back room was where visitors stayed. The Greek word for this visitors' room is *kataluma*—clumsily translated as “inn”—and it's here where Mary and Joseph found no room. Since it was already full, they must have stayed in the front, with the family who lived in the house.

The other thing that must be mentioned is everyone in that building, be it in the front room or in the back room, would have been family. That's another point we so often miss. Joseph had gone to his hometown and it's inconceivable that he had absolutely no relations there. They might have been distant relations, but that wouldn't have made a difference. He and Mary would have stayed with these people—and would have been welcomed by them, even if they hadn't been expected—because that's the way ancient hospitality worked.

In other words, there are no wicked innkeepers in this story, no stable, and no desperate and lonely couple. Quite the opposite, in fact. Luke actually presents us with a fairly ordinary scene: a baby born at home (as all babies were back then) with many of his family around. And if the baby had to be laid in a manger, well—needs must, and all that. You've got to put a newborn baby *somewhere*.

But all that was last night. This morning, we've had a rather different account of Jesus' birth. In fact it's not an account of his birth at all but rather a profound and mystical meditation on the meaning of the birth in time of the timeless Son of God. And one of the things that profound and mystical meditation tells us is that Jesus is not a stranger. He's family.

Of course sometimes babies are unwanted and we can't cope with them. So they're given up, or tragically abandoned. John even says that “He came to what was his own and his own received him not,” and, alas this has given rise to the scandalous notion of “perfidious Jews” and “Christ-killers.” Yet Christ still comes to what is his own—that is to say, to you and to me, his family—and so it must follow that it's *us* who don't

want to receive him. He comes at the wrong time. He's too disruptive. We can't cope with his insistent demands. And so we attempt to abandon him and try to get rid of him in the most brutal way possible: by crucifying within ourselves truth and grace—and love.

But the thing is, he keeps on coming. He keeps on being born among us in people that are continually surprising: in the marginalized, the disabled, the poor, the unsuitable, the socially awkward. Most surprising of all, perhaps, he keeps being born in you and me who reflect the image of Christ to the world. So if Jesus comes to his own, and we're his own—his family—then it follows that all of these other surprising ones are also his own, and therefore his family, too.

When I was a young and dogmatically rigid curate, I snorted at the notion that “Christmas is about family.” “Of course it isn't about family,” I'd fulminate. “It's about God.” How wrong I was—for there's no point to Christmas if it *isn't* about family. It's about the family which we call “the human race” but which God calls “sons and daughters.” And it's also about the family from which may be estranged but which, when we turn up on the doorstep, always takes us in.

So even though we *could* abandon this baby Jesus, we won't. We can't. No matter how demanding, or unexpected, or even unwanted, we can't help but loving this baby. And no matter how far and fast we try to run from him, some part of us will never forget the moment we saw the face of perfect love, love that will outrun us and outlast us until, exhausted, we have no choice but to fall down beside it in joyful adoration.