



## **CAN WE REALLY BELIEVE IN –**

### **4: NO ROOM AT THE INN?**

Perhaps the most famous part of the whole Christmas story is that of Joseph and Mary, with Mary on the verge of giving birth, desperately seeking shelter and finally being allowed to bed down in a stable “because there was no room for them in the inn.”

It makes a good story admittedly, but did it really happen like that, or have we simply accepted wholesale an inaccurate retelling of those extraordinary days that changed the world?

For example contrary to the popular story, there is nothing at all in Luke’s account to suggest that Mary gave birth to her son immediately or even

very soon after her arrival in Bethlehem. In fact, the words of Lk. 2v6, “While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born”, suggest the very opposite.

And did she give birth in a stable, because there was no room in the inn? The Greek word that Luke uses at this point is *kataluma*. It can variously be translated “*guest room*”, “*house*”, or “*inn*.” However it is very unlikely that Bethlehem possessed an inn because inns were to be found on trade routes and on major roads and Bethlehem was situated on neither.

Moreover Luke uses a different word, *pandocheion*, when he wants to speak of a commercial inn, as in the well-known story of the Good Samaritan (Lk.10v34). *Kataluma*, in contrast, is the word Luke uses to describe the “*guest room*” of the Last Supper (Lk.22v11), as also does Mark (Mk.14v14).

So it is far more likely that Luke is talking of a house or a guest room, rather than an inn, and most likely of all to be referring to a guest room. *The guest room of the family home to which Joseph had returned, in obedience to the requirements of the census.*

Remember that Joseph was not travelling to some unknown destination, he was returning to his family home, where relatives of his were almost

certainly still living. The problem that he and Mary encountered was not that they were strangers entering a strange village but that they were family members arriving in Bethlehem and being joined by other members of the same family all needing accommodation in the same family home.

So the problem that we sometimes encounter at Christmas of how on earth you accommodate all the family under one roof, is not a modern phenomenon. It happened that very first Christmas Day!

### **WHAT WOULD THE HOUSE HAVE BEEN LIKE?**

Archaeological and literary evidence has shown that peasant families at the time of Jesus housed their livestock inside the home, not in a separate building. The animals and the people slept in one large enclosed space, with the animals occupying a lower level and the family on a raised dais.

### **HOW CAN WE RE-PICTURE THE STORY?**

Returning to his family home, Joseph is anticipating staying with relations who are still living in Bethlehem. However he is not the only family member coming back and when Joseph and Mary arrive they discover that there is no room in the guest room of the family home because it is already occupied by other relatives.

In due course Mary goes into labour and gives birth to her first-born in the part of the home set aside for the animals, discreetly away from the noise and bustle of the overcrowded living quarters, but surrounded by enough experienced women to ensure that the birth is safe. Wrapped tight around in cloths according to Jewish birth customs of the time, Jesus is placed in a feeding trough as a makeshift cradle, because that is where the birth has taken place.

### **SO WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED AT CHRISTMAS?**

#### **A summary of all four of these leaflets**

A young woman named Mary is engaged to be married to Joseph the local carpenter. Visited by the angel Gabriel, she is told that whilst still a virgin she will conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. In that way the child to be born will be both fully human and fully divine. He will be God “enfleshed.”

At first believing that Mary has been unfaithful, Joseph resolves to give her a bill of divorce and to send her away. However in a dream the true facts

are revealed to him and he takes Mary to be his wife but they have no sexual relations until after Jesus is born.

Meanwhile in Rome the Emperor Caesar Augustus decides to extend the census that he has been taking of his empire to include those of client states. Under the direct or indirect supervision of governor Quirinius, King Herod arranges for a census to be taken according to the old traditional Jewish method of everyone returning to their family homes.

As a descendant of the house of David, Joseph takes Mary with him and returns to Bethlehem to stay with relatives. However there are so many people staying in the house that there is no room for them in the guest chamber and so they have to muck in with everyone else on the raised family dais in a home that is shared with the animals.

During her stay Mary goes into labour and gives birth in a quiet place away from all the noise in the area of the house reserved for the livestock. Jesus is then subsequently placed in a make-shift crib – a manger.

Out in the fields shepherds are keeping watch over their flock when suddenly angels proclaim to them the news and the significance of Jesus' birth. Leaving their sheep safe in the fold and guarded by their dogs, they hurry to Bethlehem to see this amazing sight.

Some weeks or months later Magi, probably from Persia, arrive at the court of King Herod asking to see the new-born King of the Jews. Maybe up to two years earlier they had seen a celestial event which had convinced them that this King had been born or was about to be born.

On arriving in Jerusalem the religious teachers tell them that they must go to Bethlehem. The "star" that they had seen at the start of their journey now identifies the house where the child is living, and on entering they worship Him and give their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Warned by God that Herod will seek the child's life they leave secretly for home. Similarly warned, Joseph also flees, taking his new family to stay as exiles in Egypt until Herod is dead. Only then do they return and only then do they go back to their home town of Nazareth, from where, some 30 years later, Jesus will begin the work that will change the world upside down.

## THE STORY OF GOD

The event which we call Christmas is amazing enough without it needing to be tinselled around by anything or by anybody.

And of all the events in the Christian calendar, this is the one which is sung about, spoken about, written about and portrayed in countless Nativity plays up and down the country, more than any other – more than Pentecost, more than Good Friday, more even than Easter Day in all its resurrection glory.

But what story are we telling? Because there are *two* tales being told at Christmas time – one that belongs to fantasy and one that belongs to reality. Yet all too often we celebrate through our songs and through our stories the fantasy - rehearsing, remembering and so *reinforcing* something that didn't actually happen. And the more we tell it as it *isn't*, the more the true story fades from view and loses its impact and its life-changing power.

For that is the heart of the whole Christian message. That at an actual moment in human history God entered our world and was born as a human baby and grew into a man.

## WHY? WHY DID HE DO THAT?

Are you willing to find out? Then what better way to start than to read the accounts of Jesus' birth and life written in the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? But don't stop with the birth of Jesus: go on to discover the Man. And in finding the Man, You will find your God.



**BUT** be warned. The birth of any baby changes your life entirely. How much more when the baby is God Himself!