

Jesus Is Born

KATHLEEN RUSHTON explains how our usual image of the birth of Jesus is different from what we find in Luke 2:1–20.

We'll see many Christmas cribs in homes and churches this season — Joseph, Mary and the baby in a stable with animals and with shepherds and kings visiting.

These crib sets derive more from the Protevangelium of James, a “novel” written about 200CE by an unknown Christian, than from the Gospels. And even our understanding of the gospel accounts need to be informed by a knowledge of the first-century Middle Eastern community and culture.

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Community Involvement

In Luke's Gospel there is no mention of the Bethlehem community into

which Mary and Joseph arrived. Yet in that culture a woman about to give birth would have been given special care and attention by other women.

The biblical scholar Kenneth Bailey, who lived and researched in the Middle East, suggests that Luke's Gospel gives us insight into the hospitality and care given to Mary. He points to the shepherds who “returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen” (Lk 2:20) — the “all” would have included the quality of hospitality that they received. If the family had not been sheltered and cared for adequately, the shepherds would have been outraged and said: “Come home with us! Our women will take care of you!” The honour of the village rested on hospitality.

Joseph of “the House and Family of David”

Luke writes of Joseph returning to his origins. He set out from Nazareth in Galilee for Bethlehem, the city of David, in Judea to be registered because he is “of the house and family of David” (Lk 2:4). When Joseph introduced himself as “Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat” (Lk 4:23-24) we know homes would have opened to him because the extended family and their connection to their place of origin was important in the Middle East.

Joseph was “royal” being from the tribe of King David. Even though the Hebrew Scriptures call Jerusalem the “City of David”, locally Bethlehem was known as the “City of David”. As a member of that famous family, Joseph would have been welcome. Another possibility would have been to stay with Mary's cousin Elizabeth who lived close to Bethlehem.

“While They Were There”

Jesus was not born the same night as his parents arrived. They had time to find shelter in a house.

Simple houses in Palestine usually had only two rooms. One

room at the end of house was kept exclusively for guests. The other was the main room where the family cooked, ate, lived and slept. At one end of the family room steps led down to a door, or a section of the room was partitioned off with timber where the family's donkey, cow and few sheep were herded at night. People and animals used the same door into the house. When Joseph and Mary arrived the guest room was already full so they were taken into the family room.

So when we read that Mary laid the baby in a "manger, because there is no place for them in the inn" (Lk 2:7), it's important to have the house layout in mind. The manger was a hollowed out stone placed by the animals' part of the family room. In Luke, the translation of "inn" means simply "a place to stay" – different from "the inn" in the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:34–35).

"And She Gave Birth"

When Mary was giving birth the family room would have been cleared of men. The local midwife and other village women would have attended, advised and cared for Mary. As was usual for a newborn in this peasant culture, Jesus was placed in the manger in the family room.

This is a different scenario from what we have grown up with and that shown in Christmas crib scenes – a couple alone with their new baby. Nancy Action says that such scenes draw our attention away from "that graced moment in the generosity of women, of patience, of vulnerability, of sacred waiting and of knowing that is resonant with the human experience of childbirth across many times and cultures." In fact, the God of love is born in a humble situation but one full of intimacy and community.

Reflecting on the Gospel

We recognise Jesus's birth as the incarnation of the Divine in our world – the common home of all life. But we can be so caught up in our human community that we miss the significance of Divine incarnation for the community of planet Earth and the cosmos. This can stop us from appreciating the revelation of God in

our midst through birth, hospitality, care and community in all its diversity and complexity.

At this time in particular we can become more attuned to evolutionary consciousness which John Haught describes as our capacity to be conscious participants in the evolution of our cultures and human community in order to "contribute, both as one human family and each one in our own modest way, to the ongoing creation of a now-awaking universe."

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This may sound out of our reach, beyond our understanding, but we see it taking "flesh" around us in simple and profound acts such as welcoming immigrants, attending to threatened species, including broken families, honouring difference, encouraging growth, learning about the cosmos. And we can connect with the depths of incarnation through contemplation and reflection.

We have many examples of how people are becoming more aware of the dignity of the life of other than human creatures. Recently two of Aotearoa New Zealand's Olympic

sailors set up a charity for the conservation of ocean life. Their first focus is to preserve the antipodean albatross. They explained: "We need to step up as a team because there are things we can do today to save them from extinction. These birds are New Zealanders."


Pope Francis is encouraging us to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home in order to care for it. He says that for deep change it's "not enough to include a few superficial ecological considerations while failing to question the logic which underlies present-day culture" which is human-centred and too often profit driven at the expense of other life.

In our gift giving this Christmas (as well as a subscription to *Tui Motu*) we might consider donating to charities which give animals – chickens, goats – to families in poor regions who can look after them and will be sustained by their eggs and milk. It's another way of stretching our focus on the Divine in the community. 🌞

Christmas: Both RL (Midnight and Dawn) and RCL (Eve, Morn and Middy) use verses from Luke 2:1-20

Painting: *Mary with the Midwives* by Janet McKenzie © 2009 USA
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The painting came into existence because of visionary Barbara Marian of Harvard, IL, USA, who commissioned this work. She passed away 12 Nov 2019




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