

The Ox: Isaiah 1.3

*The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib:
but my people does not know, they do not understand.*

Good Christians all rejoice,
With heart and soul and voice:
Ox and ass before him bow,
And he is in the manger now:
Christ was born to save,
Christ was born to save.

Every crib scene has its animals — the ox and the ass. They're part of the furniture: they belong there (after all, it's their stable). So there they are, sitting in the straw, patiently chewing the cud, while all around them stars are shining and angels are singing and feet are running ... and the most wonderful baby in the world is being born — right before their eyes.

But how did they get there? Like so many other details in the Christmas story, they're not actually mentioned in the Bible: they're the fruit of generations of story-telling, generations of people lovingly pondering this story, owning it, filling in the gaps and bringing it down to earth. And the animals really do earth the story of Jesus' birth, they fix it firmly in the very basics of ordinary people's lives. When God comes to earth, this is how it must have been — because this is the story of God coming into *our* lives.

What the Bible does mention (twice) is the manger. That was where Mary laid the baby Jesus when he was born (Luke 2.7). That was the special sign the angels gave the shepherds: "You shall find the babe, wrapped in swaddling-bands, lying in a manger" (Luke 2.12). Just to digress for a moment: swaddling-bands were ordinary baby gear: linen strips, just the normal way of wrapping up a new-born baby to hold them tight and make them feel safe and warm (before the baby-gro was invented). Fashions change in baby-care — though some still recommend swaddling as a way of reassuring a newborn. For Mary, swaddling-bands would be the basic thing a new mother had to get ready for her baby. Swaddling-bands meant a baby was loved and cared for — even if the birth wasn't exactly as planned.

A manger, though — that wasn't the normal place to lay a newborn baby. Not a bad place — the animals' feeding-trough, stuffed with hay — but not in the catalogue for a well-planned nursery. Did Mary have a nice wooden cradle, lovingly crafted by Joseph, back home in Nazareth? I'd like to think so: but in Bethlehem, all she had was a manger. And the manger implies a stable, or at least it implies that Jesus was born in a space shared with working animals. If you go to Bethlehem today, you'll be shown a cave in the Shepherds' Fields where local tradition has it that Jesus was born — a cave used over centuries to stable the working animals of the farm. Ken Bailey, who grew up in the Arab villages of Palestine and Egypt, remembers that in the homes of the very poor, the living space was always shared with the animals, with a raised floor for the family to sleep on and a manger for the animals' feeding-trough. It might have been a squeeze, but at least the animals kept you warm.

So the ox (and his manger) tell us that Jesus shared the life of the very poor — and their animals. The ox was (still is, in many parts of the world) the basic farm machine, providing the motive power for ploughing, threshing, treading the wine press, and the slow, plodding ox-carts that you could still see on the country roads in Germany in the 1960s (and in Romania in the 1990s). Not glamorous, but invaluable to a small farmer (they provided manure to enrich the soil as well) — part of a slower, more sustainable lifestyle that lived in harmony with the earth. When Jesus said, years later, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and lowly of heart" (Matthew 11.xx), he might have been thinking of the plodding, patient oxen that were part of his life when he was growing up.

But it was a verse from the prophet Isaiah that really established the ox (and the donkey) as part of the nativity scene. Isaiah was reflecting sadly on one of the paradoxes of religion — that sometimes, the more religious we think we are, the harder we find it to make room for God in our lives. What the animals do with simplicity and by instinct, we struggle with and so often get distracted. Somehow, the animals often seem to have more sense than busy, self-important humanity when it comes to making room for what really matters. And the importance of *making room for God* — making space to welcome God into our lives — is one of the great themes of Christmas. Mary laid her new-born son in a manger "because there was *no room* for them in the inn."

And that aspect of the Christmas story has captured the imagination of carol-singers and story-tellers down the ages. The king born in a stable, rejected by the rich and famous, elbowed out to the margins, down and out with the down and outs. In a largely agrarian society, there was something reassuringly homely about God being born in a stable out the back, among the patient, plodding beasts. This baby became our baby, our little lad — we could take him to our hearts as one of our own.

The Welsh carol *O Deued Pob Christon* captures it perfectly:

All poor men and humble, all lame men who stumble, Come haste ye, nor feel ye afraid: For Jesus our treasure, with love past all measure, in lowly poor manger was laid.

Though wise men who found him laid rich gifts around him, yet oxen they gave him their hay: and Jesus in beauty accepted their duty: contented in manger he lay.

Or one of my all-time favourites, *As Joseph was a-walking, he heard an angel sing, This night shall be born on earth our heavenly King. He neither shall be born in housen nor in hall, nor in the place of Paradise, but in an ox's stall: Noel. He neither shall be wrapped in purple nor in pall, but in the fair white linen that usen babies all. He neither shall be rocked in silver nor in gold, but in a wooden manger, that resteth on the mould.*

But of course a modern carol-singer might feel more at home in a disused railway van than a stable, as in this 20th-century carol by Peter D. Smith:

Joseph came to Somers Town, behind the Euston Road, Evicted from his caravan, and now of no abode; Mary sought a lodging there, shelter for her head, But all the jostling houses could offer them no bed. O stay! O stay! good travellers all, for God is born a man, and lies wrapped in a table-cloth within a railway van.

So Mary came to Euston, where a porter found them room, In a shunted unused guard's van half shrouded in the gloom. And there with no possessions, no midwife standing by, There rang throughout the station her new-born baby's cry. O stay! O stay! good travellers all, for God is born a man, and lies wrapped in a table-cloth within a railway van.

The porters came and wished her luck and brought them cups of tea, And as the rumour spread around there came to Platform Three, The other weary travellers, who travelled Christmas Day, And offered him a tribute, then turned and went their way. O stay! O stay! good travellers all, for God is born a man, and lies wrapped in a table-cloth within a railway van.

God bless, Loveday

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PS Don't forget the Christmas appeal!

Born as one of us, born to share our lives: I'm glad the ox is part of the Christmas story.