

## Christmas Day 2007

We all have our little Christmas self-indulgences. Chocolate and good Madeira feature highly in mine. And every year at this time, I make a point of reading Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol. The story is familiar to us all, and I expect we have all seen lots of different film and television adaptations – two of them were on TV yesterday. But I read the story every year, partly to remind myself how different is the real thing. It's not just that Dickens is a narrator of extraordinary genius, who leads us through a very complex collection of visions and interwoven scenes in a manner which only the written word can bring out the full. It is also the fact that film versions tend to sanitise the story and make it nothing at all, but cheerful. The greatness of Dickens, on the other hand, is his ability to warm our hearts, whilst also pulling us up short and causing us to think about the very real suffering of our fellow human beings at this time of year. The films don't make much of Scrooge, peering out of the window and seeing the lament of a desperate ghost unable to save the woman and baby, who freeze before him; they rarely portray the slave like miners, the lonely seamen, or those pathetic figures of want and ignorance personified by a wretched boy and girl clinging desperately to the ghost of the present.

I thought of A Christmas Carol when I came across and news story a week or two ago informing me that very few people were able to recite

what the media called the “facts” of the Nativity story. Presumably the story was intended to make me throw up my hands in horror, but I'm afraid it made me laugh. What is this Nativity story that we are supposed to know? And what has it to do with the Bible?

Jesus was born in a stable. Or was he? You won't find the word stable in the Gospels. He was born in a stable because there was no room at the inn, and we are so used to those Nativity plays, which featured not just an innkeeper, but an innkeeper's wife, who greet the holy family with great regret that all their rooms are full, but promising them a nice warm stable, and a bed of straw. What has that to do with the Bible? The answer is not a great deal. The word which we translate as in would probably be better rendered the launch, and it probably wasn't a permanent structure. The best explanation is probably some sort of caravansary where lots of travellers were sheltering. Was there no room in this makeshift Lodge, because it was full, or because those other travellers didn't want to be bothered with the woman on the verge of childbirth? And that unmentioned stable, could easily have been nothing more than a simple roofed shelter under which the contents of the animal trough were protected from the rain. If it was more substantial, it was probably a cave. Nowhere do we read of anyone giving permission for that desperate couple to use a feeding trough in

which to lay their baby. More likely than any other explanation is that they were trespassing.

A few days ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury, unwittingly caused controversy by reminding the world what the Bible actually says. He dared to point out that there is no mention of three wise men, and that they were certainly not kings. And yet according to the media, this shows that the Church of England is abandoning its traditional heritage. Well, if abandoning its traditional heritage consists in paying attention to what the gospel is actually saying, then I am all for it.

It doesn't, of course. Traditional Christianity teaches something very different from our sanitised Nativity plays. It teaches the doctrine of the incarnation, the notion ludicrous beyond belief that God himself identifies himself with human beings, not in the person of a king or a conqueror, but in the tiny bloody squealing, helpless, form of a new born baby, a baby born to a couple of northern peasants, who found themselves homeless for the night. And when the birth of his child is announced, the recipients of the news are not comfortable and the pious, but more outsiders, those on the fringe, the poor wretches who shared Mary and Joseph's lack of shelter, forced to take their turns guarding the livestock, which was their livelihood in the fields outside the security of the city walls.

It is easy for the church to rant at the world at Christmas time, but it would be a strange thing if the world, which doesn't know the story of God incarnate, were able to rejoice more fully than the church which does. Rather, we ought to be doubly thankful that despite all our best efforts to control and sanitise Christmas, the birth of God incarnate will not be so contained. However well we think we understand, however familiar we think we are with the story, God will surprise us, confound our expectation, threaten our security so as to re-order our world. Surely nothing is more familiar to us than Christmas, surely there is nothing we know so well? The Gospels suggest otherwise. God incarnate, the maker of heaven and earth here among us as a homeless helpless child, Christ himself suggests otherwise, asks us with a cry whether we really, truly know anything at all; takes from us everything that we thought we owned and controlled and leaves us nothing at all but love.