

## Mud and Circumstance

Gospel: Luke 2:1-14

### Christmas Day

There's an old story about a small Sunday School which was putting on the usual Christmas Nativity Play. Because there were so few children, one girl was chosen to play all of the wise men. But that young lady was more than equal to the task. At the appropriate moment she swept majestically up the aisle in flowing robes with a crown on her head. When she came to the manger she bowed and said, "Greetings baby; I bring you gifts: gold, circumstance and mud".

You may laugh, but there is wisdom here: because these are also the gifts that life brings to us: some gold – and I don't mean money and riches, but the precious moments that we often experience; lots of circumstances, usually unpredictable, and plenty of mud: difficult and challenging times which sometimes threaten to overwhelm us and the world.

When you think of the first Christmas many years ago, you might agree that today's traditional decorations are somewhat inaccurate. Here we have a beautiful tree with the usual decorations, and a crèche with Mary, Joseph, shepherds and animals. There is plenty of gold, some circumstance but no mud. So I think if we want to make the scene more realistic, we need to add some mud. Why? Because a bucket of mud, rather than the bright lights and coloured decorations shows us what God was really up to on that first Christmas.

For many years I and my family ran a smallholding with pigs, sheep and cows, and as you can imagine there was plenty of mud, particularly in the winter when some of the animals were housed in the stables. They were not the freshly scrubbed creatures that we see in today's nativity scenes. They were dirty and smelly, and produced their fair share of manure. The stables were cold and draughty and sometimes the roof leaked. And that was the kind of place where Jesus was born.

The truth is, the first Christmas was anything but clean and beautiful. It was very raw and messy. Mary was an unmarried girl far from home. Joseph was a poor carpenter trying to deal with the fact that his fiancée was carrying a child that was not his own. There was no hospital, not even a room, and no place to put the child except an animals' feeding trough. Not the sweet images that we see in today's Christmas cards.

Why did God choose to be born in a cold dirty stable, when he could have come with trumpets blaring, riding through the sky on a golden chariot? Perhaps the answer lies in the kind of God he chooses to be. If Jesus had arrived in a blaze of glory he could have been God over us, or even God for us. What he

would not have been is Emmanuel: God **with** us, God alongside us in the dirt, the cold and the noise, sharing our ups and downs, our joys and sorrows in this beautiful muddy world.

And now a story about something which happen about 20 years ago. This is a true story, though I have changed some details. It happened when two teachers were travelling through Romania teaching ethics and morality from a Christian perspective. They visited schools, police stations, hospitals and finally an orphanage – a desperately poor orphanage with about 100 children who had been neglected and abandoned. As it was close to Christmas the two teachers decided to tell the Christmas story about Mary, Joseph and Jesus, with the shepherds and Magi bringing gifts. Then they handed out paper and felt tips and invited the children to create their own manger scenes. Everything was going well, until they noticed the picture of a little boy called Misha: Misha had drawn two babies in the manger. So they asked him about this.

Misha began to tell the story of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, but then his story took a different course: He said, “When Mary was putting Jesus in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked if I had a place to stay. I told him I didn’t have any parents and had no place to stay. And I was sad because I didn’t have a gift to give him. And then I thought Jesus might be cold in that stable and maybe I could go and be with him in the manger to help keep him warm. So I asked Jesus if I could keep him warm in the manger, and he said the gift of warmth would be the greatest gift he could ever receive. And he said I could be with him for ever”.

Yes Misha, Jesus will be with you, and with each one of us to guide us, comfort us and love us, forever. He is with us in our golden moments, our circumstances, good and bad, and most importantly, in the mud.

Merry Christmas

Martha Taft Golden  
St. Mary’s, Holmbury  
25<sup>th</sup> December 2024

Amen

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