

MHCC – Christmas 2020

Today is the day for re-telling a story we know so well we barely need to open the bible to find the words. But one of those words is a very misleading translation: the inn. *I know reconsidering the translation of a Greek word is not on most people's list of fun Christmas morning activities, but bear with me.*

Luke's story of Jesus' birth says he was laid in a manger because there was no room in the *kataluma*. This has long been translated 'inn', with the story reading: The young couple were not able to secure a hotel room so had to sleep out the back in the shed, or in a cave. It is lonely and stinky, and they are ostracised from society, shut out from hospitality.

Except there is another word for 'inn' that Luke uses elsewhere. And he uses *kataluma* to refer to the sort of room Jesus is looking for to host Passover. Hotels as we know them didn't exist in first century Palestine. It is not 'a room' they don't have, but 'room' as in 'space' or 'a place'. And Joseph had come to his home town, which makes it weird that he would be booking into a hotel anyway.

Another suggestion is that *kataluma* refers a communal shelter where travellers could stop for the night – probably all under one roof, with people sleeping on raised terraces and animals on the floor or tethered outside. Its no place for a woman to give birth. There was *no place for them* to lay a baby down safely so they borrowed an animal feed-trough and made the best of things. It was probably all a bit awkward but also one of those moments where something unexpected or difficult creates community out of a group of strangers. A little bit of God's Shalom, strangers becoming a family for the evening.

Many scholars now suggest *kataluma* is a general word for 'the place where they were staying'. It does not have to mean a public place at all. Joseph brought Mary to his home town and probably stayed with his own family, possibly in his childhood home but at least with relatives. Archeologists say houses of this era often had a main room with a portion for animals (at night) and a portion for humans, divided by feeding troughs. In Bethlehem some used caves as warm basements for animals. The *kataluma* could refer to a small room on the roof used by newly married couples like Mary and Joseph - which were too small for giving birth or nursing a baby – *there was not room in the place they were staying*. So Mary moved into the main room. Or the *kataluma* could be the main room, crowded with census guests, and a lack of space moved her to the warm dry animal room, perhaps the basement cave. Either way, she gave birth surrounded by family.

Or perhaps they were in Joseph's family home but ostracised. Perhaps the sense of *no place for them* was not literal space but metaphoric – they had somewhere to sleep but their circumstances put them on the outside of things.

It is not impossible that *kataluma* refers to a public accommodation of some sort. The language could reflect a couple forced far from home by government decree and ending up sleeping rough. But you don't HAVE to read it that way.

There is space to interpret the words of the story in different ways.

So also there is space today for us to interpret and experience the language and traditions of Christmas in different ways according to our personal context today. There can be a lot of pressure today to fit into a greeting-card image of what this day is about. *This might be no more real for you than Jesus' being born at Joseph's parents' place and Joseph and Mary finding themselves pictured forever after in a wobbly timber shed with a star on the roof.* We just don't know the details of Jesus' birth. What matters is that he WAS born, and that brought him into the diversity of human experiences. *What does this Jesus look like in YOUR experience, today?*

Perhaps the things you need this Christmas are awkward or embarrassing and you are heading into tricky social territory – *like a woman giving birth in a communal public sleeping area.* Where has this remarkable baby left traces in your situation? Where might God be drawing odd combinations of people together in your Christmas to reflect moments of the eternal Shalom of God?

Perhaps you are far from your loved ones this Christmas – today's story gives you a manger to lie down beside, where a very tired family is also far from their support network, far from their loved ones, far from the women who would help Mary with her first baby. Perhaps the borders that hold us away from those we love today are geographic and pandemic, *like a Roman census moving Mary and Joseph to another town.* Or perhaps they are relational, things we have done, or others have done, that leave us far from home today, literally or metaphorically – *like an illegitimate pregnancy putting a young couple on the edge of their family.*

Or perhaps you are wrapped in the love of your family today. Perhaps your home is so overflowing with good things that you have to find new, unusual spaces for that to play out – *like a baby born in the middle of happy family chaos, wrapped lovingly and laid in the best bed available – even if it was an animal feed trough until today.*

Where is this baby who turns the world upside-down in the midst of your experience today?

Your experience is real and you are not alone in it. God meets you there, *using words however you need them to reach you.* I believe that the God who risked human birth, in a time and place where birth was often fatal and life fragile, will risk misinterpretation or even heresy to reach you wherever you are.