

The Manger

‘And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.’ (Luke 2 v. 7)



GIOTTO: Birth of Christ (detail).
1304-06, Fresco, Arena Chapel, Padua

Luke's description of the birth of Jesus focuses on his bed in a manger;

indeed the manger is mentioned three times. This single repeated detail is the source of all descriptions and images of the stable, the animals and the traditional Nativity scene, familiar in carols, art and drama.

Through the centuries, Christians have pondered the meaning of this image – a baby in a manger. These words and pictures explore how they have understood it and how this strange 'sign' can be used to explain who Jesus is and what Christmas means.

This Advent, at Bishop Street, we are exploring the Christmas hymn, *Cradled in a manger meanly*, which helps us to think about the meaning of this image for us as Christians and for the world.

Ox and Ass

**‘He shrank not
from the oxen’s
stall; Nor
scorned the
manger-bed’**

*From east to east,
from shore to shore,*
Caelius Sedulius c. 450
AD, H&P 99



The Ox and Ass kneel to Jesus lying in the manger.
4th Century Christian Sarcophagus, Milan

From the Christmas story onwards, Matthew’s Gospel makes many references to Old Testament writings and their fulfilment in the life and death of Jesus. Although Luke is less direct, the image of Jesus in the manger may be intended to make the same connections with the words of the Old Testament. This was the way it was often understood in the first centuries of Christianity.

The earliest Christian hymns and images of the birth of Jesus focussed on the baby in the manger. Jesus is often shown lying between an ox and ass, as on the fourth century tomb or sarcophagus from Milan. This image recalls the words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand’. (Isaiah 1 v. 3)

In early art, such as the Milan tomb, the ox and ass are often shown kneeling before the baby or bowing their heads to him. Like the Old Testament story of Balaam’s ass, this suggests that animals are sensitive or open to the presence of God. Charles Wesley was probably thinking of the meaning of the animals in the stable when he wrote: ‘When thou in our flesh didst appear, all nature acknowledged thy birth’ (*All glory to God in the sky* H&P 400). The presence of animals also draw attention to the mystery of God the Creator being born as one of us and living among the creatures of earth.

The acknowledgement of baby Jesus by the stable animals sets up a contrast with the failure of people to recognise or welcome him at his birth: ‘He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him’. (John 1 vv. 10-11)

The other Old Testament reference associated with the manger comes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament familiar in the time of Jesus. In this, the opening words of Habbakuk 3 v. 2 read: ‘In the midst of two animals thou shalt be known’. Once again the focus is on recognising God’s identity and presence in the baby Jesus.

Chalice and Bread

**‘Though the lowliest
form doth veil Thee,
as of old in Bethlehem’**

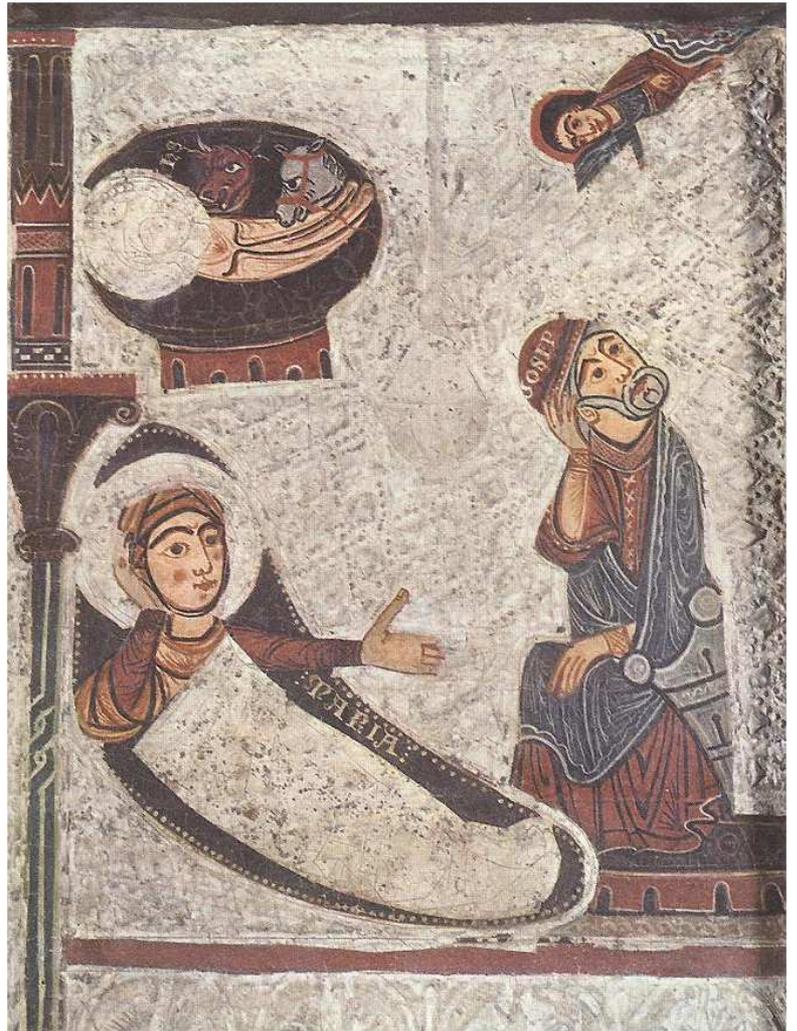
*Lord enthroned in heavenly
splendour* G. H. Bourne, H&P 616

A manger is a feeding trough. Some images of the Nativity show the ox and ass bending close over the manger. It can almost look as if Jesus is in danger from these greedy animals. However, the connection between Jesus in the manger and the idea of being fed and nourished is an old and important one.

The literal meaning of ‘Bethlehem’ – the town where Jesus was born – is ‘House of Bread’. Early Christians made the connection between God becoming a human being in Jesus (his nature and presence hidden and unrecognised) and God’s presence in the bread and wine shared at

Communion. In Jesus’s human life (his incarnation) and in the sharing of Communion apparently ordinary and familiar things are made holy and ‘make a place’ where we can meet with God and know His presence. Christians believe Jesus shows us the human face of the invisible God.

Medieval images of the Nativity often show a manger raised up high. It is sometimes deliberately shaped like a chalice, as in the painting from medieval Spain. These strange details emphasised the connection between the Nativity and being spiritually nourished in Communion. Medieval religious culture focussed on the presence of Jesus experienced through the bread and wine of Communion (the mass). Ordinary people only received the bread once a year at Easter. They were encouraged to focus their devotion on the sight of the Communion bread raised up in the hands of the priest.



Damaged Nativity scene with Jesus shown in a raised manger shaped like a chalice.

UNKNOWN MASTER, Catalan

1200-50, Wood, Barcelona

Poverty

**‘Born among the poor
on a stable floor, cold
and raw, you know our
hunger’**

Child of Joy and Peace

Shirley Erena Murray StF 194

A manger is an improvised cot. The use of a feeding trough as a baby’s bed highlights the disruption caused the census in Bethlehem. It recalls that there was no room in the inn (or in the domestic part of the house where people would expect to stay). The manger is a symbol of exclusion. It shows God in Jesus sharing the hardships and sufferings of the poorest in society.

The manger recalls the chosen poverty and dependence of Jesus’s life during his preaching: ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ (Matthew 8 v.20). The poverty of Jesus’s birth and his life point to God’s generous and self-emptying Love in sharing our lives: ‘For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich’ (2 Corinthians 8 v.9).



Jesus in a wicker manger and the animals breathing on him to keep him warm.

Bolton Hours, York England
early 15th Century

The image of Jesus in poverty also appeals to our emotions and inspires pity. St Francis created the first living ‘crib scene’ in 1223: ‘to represent the birth of the Child just as it took place at Bethlehem, so that people should see with their own eyes the hardships He suffered as an infant’. Writers inspired by St Francis emphasised the poverty of Jesus’s birth. The flapping tongues of the ox and ass in the picture from the York Hours are probably inspired by the Franciscan story, told by Nicholas Love, that the animals had to breathe on the baby Jesus to save him from freezing in the cold stable.

The Tomb

‘When earthly values stand beside, the manger and the cross’

Can we by searching find out God,
Elizabeth Cosnett, H&P 76

At the start of Jesus’s life on earth, he is laid in a manger because there is no room for him and his family. At the end of his life he is executed outside the walls of a city and laid to rest in a borrowed tomb. We think of human birth and death as opposites, but in the life of Jesus, birth and death are connected. In both Jesus is excluded by people. In both God shares our human life and the vulnerability of our flesh and blood. In both God's redemptive Love is revealed.



Jesus in a manger shaped like carved stone tomb.
Hours of Alice de Reydon. C1320

Many traditional images of the Nativity make subtle references to what lies in store for the baby in the manger. Sometimes his mother Mary holds him limply across her lap in the way she is shown holding the dead body of her son, taken down from cross. Sometimes a cross is hidden in the wooden shape of the stable or the manger. Sometimes Jesus lies on a cross made of sheaves of wheat, recalling the name of Bethlehem and his death.

In the image from the Hours of Alice de Reydon the manger is shown as an elaborate stone structure. This is clearly not ‘realistic’. Instead the manger copies the shape of a classical tomb or sarcophagus. It suggests the idea of that just as Jesus sleeps in the manger to show us God’s Love, he will also taste death for us: ‘What may I say? Heaven was his home; but mine the tomb wherein he lay’ (*My song is love unknown*, Samuel Crossman, StF 277)

Humility

**‘Humbled to the dust
he is and in a manger
lies’**

Glory be to God on High
Charles Wesley, StF 199

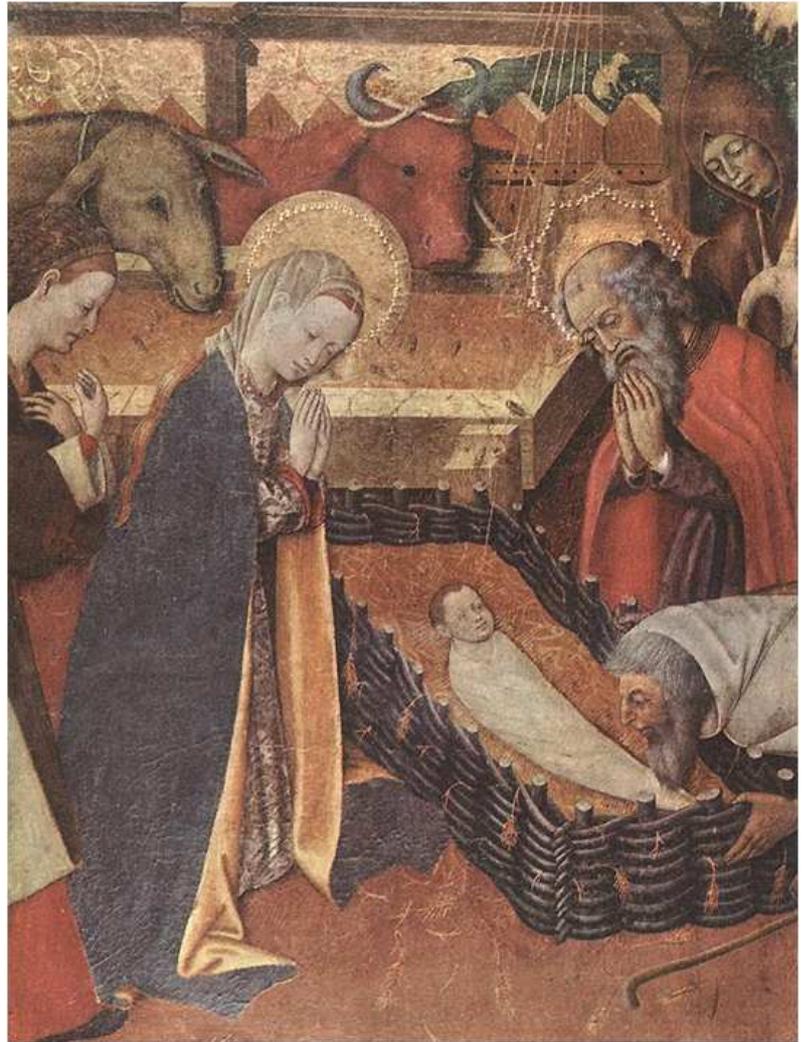
The manger is a sign of humility. Jesus and his family have to make do with what is ‘left over’. Jesus is born among the mess and dirt of human existence. His first cradle signals his ‘downward mobility’ and the coming of God ‘down to such a world as this’ (See *amid the winter snow*: Edward Caswall, StF215).

Humility is an essential part of God's self-emptying Love in Jesus. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul describes how Jesus: ‘being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ... humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross.’ (Philippians 2 vv.

7b-8). Jesus’s attitude challenges our understanding of what is important. From beginning to end, his life rejects our world’s craving for power and prestige, wealth and importance.

From about 1400 onwards artists moved away from the image of a raised up manger to show Jesus close to the ground (the word humility comes from the word for earth). The manger is set down low or he is simply shown lying naked on the straw of the stable floor. His mother also kneels or sits on the ground. This change, associated with the writings of the mystic, Bridget of Sweden, emphasised Jesus’s humility.

Christians believe that Christmas celebrates that God in Jesus came ‘down’ to be with us, making a bed in a manger. Our Advent hymn, *Cradled in a manger meanly* includes a prayer asking Jesus to ‘stoop again’ into our flawed and tangled hearts and lives to ‘make a Christmas’ in them.



Jesus lying in a low wicker manger while Mary and Joseph kneel on the ground.

MARTORELL, Bernat

The Nativity (detail), 1440s, Panel, Berlin