

THE NAMING OF JESUS First Sunday after Christmas Year ABC

Numbers 6:22-27, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 2:15-21

I wonder how many of you attended a Nativity play this Christmas. I went to two and both held true to the traditional story – no octopi or walrus. No we had a messenger angel, Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus of course, a donkey, a couple of innkeepers, a stable, a manger, shepherds, sheep, a star and three wise men.

So I have a New Year Quiz for you:

- In how many of the four gospels does the birth narrative appear with Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus?
- In how many does a messenger angel feature?
- What about the donkey?
- Innkeepers?
- Or the stable?
- The manger?
- Shepherds?
- The star and the wise men?

Each of the gospel writers carefully crafted their own works, with Mark's perhaps having the most obvious structure, but no nativity narrative. Each writer chose what to include out of a wealth of material. Matthew chose the wise men, Luke shepherds.

So we read of the journey to Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus, wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. That's right isn't it?

Well, not quite. The translation "no room in the inn" is a good line for an appeal at Christmas to make room for Jesus in our hearts but it is not an accurate translation. Better, as in the NIV, is "no space in the guest room".

Joseph was returning, as per decree, to his home town, taking with him his pregnant bride. So it is highly likely that Joseph was a member of a Bethlehem extended family and approached a relative for accommodation. But the guest room was already full so Joseph and Mary were housed elsewhere. But not in a stable as there wouldn't have been any stables.

Instead the animals were usually brought inside the house for the night and let outside during the day. And this way of living provides the setting for the birth of Jesus.

To get a better grasp on this it is helpful to understand the layout of a house at the time. Basically the family lived, ate and slept in one room which had a lowered section at one end near the entry/exit door where the animals would be housed during the night. And at the end of the living quarters would be hollowed out areas – mangers – with fodder for the animals. And it is in one of these that the baby Jesus might have been laid.

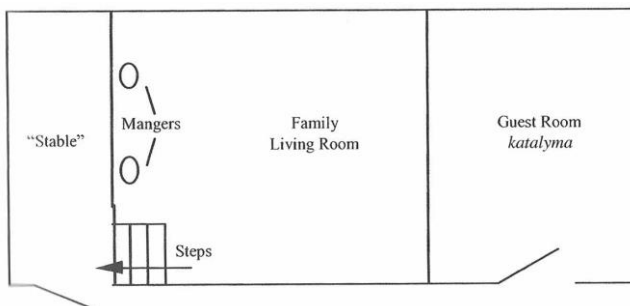


Figure 1.3. Typical village home in Palestine with attached guest room

But there was also another type of manger, a special wooden one, which would be brought in as necessary. And this manger was to house the “lamb without spot or blemish” for the temple sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. The lamb would be wrapped in cloth to keep it clean and pristine before being laid in the manger.

And it is interesting that whereas in general sheep were looked after out in the desert these specially bred lambs were in the fields near Bethlehem.

So this is the background to our gospel reading this morning which juxtaposes the response of the shepherds to the message from the angelic host with the naming of Jesus at his circumcision 8 days later.

This may, of course, be just because they are chronologically close. But it may be that Luke has told us about the shepherds because he wants to make us think about the name Jesus. Only Luke writes of this official naming ceremony.

And the name Jesus, the same as the name Joshua, means “The Lord saves”. In Matthew 1 we read *that an angel of the Lord* told Joseph that he should name the baby *Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins*.

So let’s back track a little. The shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem – probably the same shepherds as those responsible for raising the sacrificial lambs for the temple worship – have been told by an angel of the Lord that a Saviour has been born, a baby, wrapped in cloths and lying in manger. That might have rung some bell don’t you think?.

Not a baby lamb wrapped in cloths lying in a manger waiting for the temple sacrifice that would save people from their sins, but Jesus, the Lord who saves, the Lamb of God, wrapped in cloth and lying in that same manger, waiting to grow up to be the Saviour of the world through his death on the cross.

Of course, the shepherds wouldn’t know all that. But they would no doubt understand that something highly significant had happened with the birth of this baby; maybe grasp some connection between the swaddled lamb in the manger that they supplied and a baby born and laid in a manger, a Saviour born to them. We have read only half of the account this morning but a new-born baby lying in a manger is a central theme in Luke’s story of the shepherds.

Shepherds were of rather low regard. They were perpetually ritually unclean due to their constant close association with the sheep. But this didn’t hold them back from visiting the baby in a manger. Why should it? An angel of the Lord had told them about him. No, instead they *hurried* to see him. They were full of the news.

They spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

What did they say? Was it just about the astounding sight of angels in the night? Or did they talk about a baby lying in a manger where a temple lamb would lay? Did they say the baby was named Jesus, the Lord who saves? Did they speak of *a Saviour born to you*? Certainly they glorified and praised God *for all the things they had heard and seen* so it was more about than a cute baby in an unusual setting.

Of course, the shepherds would be unlikely to surmise, unlike the prophet John the Baptist, that this baby was to become *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). And they would not understand what we understand, that Jesus died and rose again, not just for the forgiveness of our sins, like the slain temple lamb, but to deal with sin itself.

I wonder, when we celebrate at Christmas the baby in the manger, in our nativity plays, our carols and our Christmas cards, whether we stop to take time to marvel, to glorify and praise God, that the baby Jesus swaddled in the manger like the temple lamb, is named the Lord saves, who not only saves by forgiving past sin but saves in the now by dealing with sin itself – at least he does if we will let him. Amen