

CHRISTMAS – 2019

There are discrepancies in the account of Jesus' birth recorded in the gospels and the story as it has evolved, and the evolved story has smoothed over some of the details in the gospel. We sing the hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see the lie," yet the gospels tell us the place was heaving with people to the extent that there was no room for a heavily pregnant woman to give birth. We sing of the little Lord Jesus sweetly sleeping on the hay while the cattle are making an absolute racket, the ass would also be grunting and when Jesus wakes, no crying he makes. Really?

St Luke's gospel tells us about shepherds camping out on the hillside during winter while they looked after the sheep when an angelic chorus sang to them. In an article written last year in the blog page Patheos, Fr Longnecker points out that the shepherds were not simply country bumpkins but played an important role in Jewish life. The Jewish historian Josephus records that at the time of Passover, thousands of lambs would be sacrificed in the Temple. The Passover lamb was called the Lamb of God.

Lambs sacrificed at Passover had to be male, less than a year old and to have no blemishes. To achieve this they had to be born in controlled conditions and checked out for blemishes by a Jewish priest before they were raised in a protected environment. But where did these lambs come from? Jewish Law stipulated that they had to be born within a 5-mile radius of Jerusalem. Bethlehem is just 5 miles from Jerusalem. These legal requirements meant that the hillsides around Bethlehem were virtually a factory farm for sheep. When the lambs were born they were wrapped in strips of cloth and placed in a stone feeding trough in the birthing barn until the priest inspected them. The angels told the shepherds to go to Bethlehem where they would find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth – swaddling cloths, lying in a manger which would be a chipped-out stone feeding or drinking trough (the manger being a wooden crib appeared in the mediaeval versions of the story.

So what does this mean? Jesus was born in the same place as some of the lambs that would be sacrificed at Passover. The Shepherds were told to go to the stable and see the true Lamb of God who would also offer himself as a sacrifice at Passover for the salvation of the world. This is why the shepherds glorified God. They had seen God's Messiah, the one who John the Baptist describes as the Lamb of God.

As a footnote, some people dismiss the December date for the birth of Jesus because sheep give birth in Spring in the northern hemisphere. That is true of Europe, but the most common breed of sheep in the Middle east is the Awassi and in Israel the main lambing season is from December to January.

If we focus on the gospel story of the shepherds, today we are celebrating the birth of Jesus, the Lamb of God. He is our Lord and Saviour who is our Passover Lamb who offered himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world in order to reconcile the world to God and enable those of good will who respond to this sacrifice of self-giving love to be saved and live the new life of God's Kingdom here and now.

The decorations around us celebrate the season of Christ's birth, but the crucifix on the rear wall portrays the self-offering of the True Lamb of God at the time of Passover effecting our deliverance from slavery to evil. Beneath it is the tabernacle where the sacramental body and blood of Christ is reserved and very soon, as in every mass, the priest holds up the consecrated bread and wine before the faithful and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the Sin of the world," and invites you to share in the Heavenly Banquet of the Lamb. We celebrate the birth of Jesus the Lamb of God in this season, but salvation and spiritual nourishment through God's Lamb is the *reason* for the season.

May you all have a Holy and Blessed Christmas

Msgr Harry Entwistle

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