

Christmas Morning 2024

(Sermon by Ally Barrett)

I'd like you to imagine, if you can, a nativity scene.

If you don't have a visual imagination (if you can't see things in your head) you are welcome to come and look at the one that is set up just beneath the pulpit here, which was made especially for this church by an artisan in Africa. Or, if you have a pen or pencil handy, you could doodle a nativity scene while I'm talking – you'll see that there's a whole blank page on the back of your service booklet that you are welcome to draw on.

There are three things that I want us to reflect on about our nativity scene. The first is the setting: our reading tells us that Jesus was laid in a manger because there was no room at the inn, so many nativity scenes are set in a stable, but it's more likely that 'no room at the inn' meant 'no spare guest room in the house' and that the manger would have been in the downstairs room within the house where the family would bring their animals in for the night to keep them safe and warm. Hospitality was everything in Jesus' culture, and since Mary and Joseph were visiting his family's hometown, it's highly likely that the house they stayed in belonged to a relative of his – and even if it didn't, hospitality was so central to Jewish culture that someone would always have found them somewhere. The family would have welcomed them, the animals would have been redistributed to make room, and help would have been sought for the birth itself. So although the bible reading says there was no room, there would actually have been a lot of active 'making room' going on from the moment that Mary and Joseph arrived. When our nativity scene Christmas cards arrive in the post, or when we get our own home nativity set down from the loft to put it on display, we tend to need to do some moving around too – in our house, certainly, there is a lot of moving the 'normal things' off surfaces to make room for the seasonal things, a clearing away of clutter to make room for what is special. Maybe this process could be a tiny reminder for us that we can make the Christ child welcome in whatever way we can – we might not have a whole spare room for there to be a set-aside space, but the process of clearing clutter out of the way so that there's at least *somewhere* is itself a spiritual process, as we invite this story into our homes. At the first

Christmas there wasn't a room, so people *made* room, and that process of making room was where the hospitality is most meaningful.

The second thing I'd like to think about is the people. Who is there? In a nativity scene you certainly expect to see Mary, Joseph and the baby, and you might get both shepherds and magi (in a way that nativity scenes smush together Luke and Matthew's gospels and make the timeline much more compact than it probably really was), and you will probably have some animals. In some traditions there are a lot of other figures included as well. For instance, in Provence there is a tradition of including 'Santons' (little saints) in nativity scenes. These are ordinary people representing normal community life, added to the nativity scene as if they have just wandered in exactly as they are. There is a similar tradition in Spanish nativity sets. I have some nativity scene pictures at home that include a man with a string of onions, a boy playing with a dog, and a woman with a huge loaf of bread. They are not in the bible accounts, they're just regular people, people like you and me – I think it's wonderful that they could just wander in, and are welcome there, as they came to see this wondrous thing that has come to pass. In the nativity scene you are imagining in your mind or drawing on your service booklet, I wonder who you would like to add? Please feel free to do so – the more the merrier! Go wild, be as imaginative as you like! And stick figures are completely OK, it doesn't have to be a work of art (and you and God both know who they are).

The third thing I'd like us to reflect on is the composition, which is just a fancy artistic name for the layout of the nativity scene – a lot of thought goes into composition when you're planning a picture. For very practical reasons all artists leave a gap in the crowd, through which you can see the baby, otherwise you wouldn't be able to tell it's a nativity scene. But that gap is important theologically and spiritually too. The gap shows us that there's always room for one or two more people, it's for the people who came late, it's for the people who are looking at the picture, it's for the people who turn up slightly at random, perhaps with their string of onions or their dog. It's for all of those people, that gap is there for them, and it's there for us. It's an invitation so we know we can wander in, and not just to look in from the outside, but to come all the way in and join the crowd, to

become part of the picture and take our place around the manger. Like in our collect this morning: Lord Jesus Christ, your birth at Bethlehem *draws* us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth...' And the chorus of our opening carol today: 'O come, let us adore him', yes, O *come*, let us adore him, yes really *let's all come and adore him*. That's the invitation of a nativity scene. That gap is for you and it's for me.

We thought we were welcoming Jesus (and of course we are), but it turns out he is the one that is welcoming us. The hospitality that we show him, the hospitality shown him by the owners of that house and their animals in their downstairs room. Their hospitality to him enables him to offer his hospitality to us. Jesus accepted the hospitality of the world and all that meant (both wonderful and terrible) so that we could accept the hospitality of heaven.

So, I would say to you today: look at your nativity sets again. Look at the gap that is just 'you-shaped', where there is room for you and those you love, room for everyone. Go all the way in, break that fourth wall, and kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth.

Amen.