

No place*Luke 2:1-20*

It's such a powerful, unsettling image from the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph, arriving at Bethlehem, and finding that there is no place for them in the inn, and having to make do with a stable. The footsore father, the heavily pregnant mother. A journey of eighty or so miles from Nazareth in the north down to Bethlehem in the south was an arduous one, all the more for a pregnant woman. I reckon it would have taken about as long as trying to get down Braid Road and around Hermitage Drive and neighbouring streets to where we are tonight.

In first century Palestine without the extensive system of good roads and safe travel made possible by the ever-present legions, Jesus might have been born somewhere other than the City of David. Mary and Joseph made it in time. But there was no place for them at the inn.

No place.

The sense of place, and space is such a fundamental part of being a human. That old Scottish question, asking where someone lives, "Where do you stay; where's your place?" It's not necessarily about ownership, it is about belonging, and having some sort of footprint on the earth. When we lose that sense of being placed, and of belonging, I think we lose something of our identity. How we fit in and where we fit in matters. It's not all that we are; but it's a part. A sense of place and belonging gives us a kind of sense of being part of somewhere, even if only for the shortest of times.

After all 2022 has been we have a whole community, a whole country, a whole world wondering what place there is for them.

As we look at our world, and its shifting population, there are people migrating and being displaced because of war, persecution, famine, and poverty. Situations far beyond anything we can begin to imagine. There's a Christmas card going around this year that has Mary and Joseph at a doorway being told by the innkeeper, "I'm afraid the nearest available inn is in Rwanda." In the United Kingdom, we have a policy, even if it has legal permission, is both immoral and inhumane. Just because something is legal doesn't necessarily make it desirable. The Rwanda deportation scheme is nothing to be proud of, and the Prime Ministers and Home Secretaries and others who promote and support it should be ashamed of themselves. At the time of His birth, Jesus, Joseph, and Mary were not refugees, but a few days after they were; fleeing to Egypt to avoid persecution. Today's Government policy would not have permitted entry to Jesus and His family. Later in His ministry, Jesus taught, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."ⁱ You look for the relevance of the Jesus and the Bible today? There it is: uncomfortable not only for Governments but for us too – because these words have consequences for how *we* behave.

Is there no place for Jesus in the United Kingdom tonight? No way in for the Christ-child of Bethlehem, the Light of the World, the Prince of Peace?

What else is there for which there is 'no place' in our world tonight? A lasting peace in Ukraine, blocked by the megalomania, paranoia and greed of Vladimir Putin? Whose knock-on effect beyond the evils of war and cruelty in Ukraine, has in part caused harsh fuel shortages across Europe and escalating fuel poverty. An NHS properly funded, properly staffed, who deserve more than polite clapping? A well-resourced national rail service that should be about providing safe and efficient transport, and not about making a profit. An approach to homelessness which

managed to provide safe and warm space for the majority during lockdown, but now finds the same issue sliding down the list of priorities. Tonight, it is estimated that there are around 4,000 homeless people in Edinburgh. An approach to wages and employment that meant this country addresses the reality that 1 in 5 are going hungry or cold, cutting back on essentials, let alone affording extras? Is there no space in the agendas of Holyrood and Westminster to address the fact that, as a C4AD Christian Augustine said: "Charity is no substitute for justice withheld?" Society is in danger of accepting homelessness, hunger, and lack of warmth as the norm. Good people in churches and charities have helped create a huge industry to support those in need. We have become accustomed to the 'no place' mentality that leaves the frail and the vulnerable, the poor and the hungry, on the outside. Not to criticise charity, but to realise that we now normalise crisis. No space.

And yet. And yet. In the nativity story of the Bible, space was eventually found. Not an ideal space. Not a perfect space. Not an expected space. But a space where hope gained another toe-hold on the soul of world. A space where the determination of God, and the resilience of God, made room for something new to inspire and to keep on inspiring us. Inspire us not to accept the world the way that it is. Inspire us not to give up when the going is tough. Inspire us to be the best that we can be despite the temptation to hide, or to turn away, or to think there is nothing that can be done in the face of tremendous odds.

Each Christmas Eve, the One for Whom there was no space makes space. He comes and reaches out from across the millennia to make us pause, and wonder, and reflect, and dare to hope. No magic wand and everything is rosy. But a still, and maybe steely determination to keep on. Keep caring. Keep smiling. Keep loving.

No space. But Jesus makes space, and asks us, this Christmas Eve, if we will let Him in, even for a moment. To hold us and heal us. To comfort us and challenge us. To empower us and renew us. Because it's *not* all over, it's just beginning.

If you find yourself shut out. If you find yourself overlooked or forgotten. If you wonder if you'll ever work again, or have enough to get by, or laugh again, or be at peace again, or love again.

Into all of these broken spaces in your world, and your lives, Jesus creeps in tonight. For you. For me. And suddenly the space lights up, and warms up, and the *possibility* of community and family and belonging and inclusion and welcome, and something better, and space for everyone becomes real. Or at least we see how we might make it real.

The message of Christmas is, make space for Jesus. He makes space for you. There is a need for His kind of mercy; His kind of hope; and His kind of love tonight. Each year we need reminding. And each year the Christmas story comes back to us, until, at last, we open up our lives, our community, our church, our country, our world, and make a space for this little love born in Bethlehem Who, if we let Him, will help us change everything.

Amen

ⁱ Matthew 25:35-36