

# The Inn and the Manger

Rev. Peter M. Buss

It was symbolic that the inn should be full in Bethlehem. It was the place where we would have expected Joseph and Mary and the infant Lord to lay their heads. There was room for the Roman soldiers, and the tax collectors, and the taxpayers. There was plenty of room for those conducting the business of the world. But for the Lord of heaven and earth? Had they known He was coming to earth that night they would probably have found space. But they would have done so reluctantly, because it would have interfered with the things that interested them. In their deepest hearts, there was no room. The available places were already taken.

Had it pleased the Lord, He could have been born in the greatest splendor, “been laid in a bed adorned with precious stones” (*Apocalypse Explained* 706). To what effect? He would have been born among those who cared nothing for His doctrine and who did not love Him. He chose to be born where good people might come to see Him. He selected a place where shepherds, who would have found palaces barred to them, might be summoned by an angel choir. He knew they would treasure forevermore what sophisticated rulers would have disdained.

He also chose to be born in a manger because of its representation. Had He been born in a palace, there would be no internal importance to the place of His birth. A manger represents the doctrine of truth from the Word. It is that holy, yet little esteemed area of the human mind which alone is receptive of Christ the Lord. Just as a manger, where horses feed, was not often visited by the rich, the proud, the ambitious or merely selfish; just as it would be considered by the worldly a very poor place to lay a new-born baby; so the doctrine of the Lord’s Word is but little regarded by sophisticated people. Yet it is the birthplace of the Lord.

In two ways, then, the birthplace tells of a spiritual state, a way that the Lord comes. First, it tells why He was born at all. Secondly, it tells how He is born in our minds—what part of our minds can house Him at His birth.

Why did the Lord come at all? Because the inns of human minds were filled up with things that excluded Him. The fullness of the inn at Bethlehem tells of a state of mind reached over thousands of years. The inn represents the external, natural mind. It is the mind in which we dwell. It is the mind that thinks about and lives in this world. Over the centuries that mind became filled right up with things that exclude the Lord.

It should not have been this way. The natural mind was made to live in this world and to enjoy the world, of course. But it was also made to house the truths of the Word which allow the Lord to be there. Our natural minds ought to have the Lord in them. They ought to learn His Word, and be taught about His way. And that is why an inn also represents a place of instruction (*Apocalypse Explained* 706:12; *Apocalypse Explained* 444c; cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 5495/6; 7041). We ought to be able to learn how to make the principles of heaven work here on earth. We ought to be able to learn from the Word how to live the laws of God. Every truth we learn about the world God made, or about other people and their lives or about truth itself should be gathered in the inn of our minds. This makes it habitable for the Lord.

Over the centuries this stopped being the case. The inn became a place of self-gratification. People stored there all their affections for worldly things, and the knowledges that would help them to get what they wanted. This would not have been totally wrong. But they filled it in a manner that excluded the Lord. They filled it with wants that led to evil. Remember that not Mary, nor Joseph, nor Jesus could fit into the inn. Mary represents the innocent affection of truth. Such innocence had no place, for it was in favor of true values. Joseph represents the good of a true understanding. Such understanding would be obedient to the Word. And Jesus Himself represents that charity which is God with us. He could find no room where self is all that mattered.

In His wondrous plan for His birth, the Lord knew this. He knew also in His mercy that He could not come into natural minds so filled with worldly and destructive feelings. If He did, He would be inviting a rejection. This would not hurt Him. But it *would* hurt those who rejected Him.

His wisdom and His mercy therefore found a new place for His birth in us. He prepared a spiritual manger. There, unnoticed by the inhabitants of that inn, He could begin to work His wonders. He could gather round Him those few blessed affections able to worship Him. And they could carry to the world the good tidings of His birth.

Both the inn and the manger are places of instruction in our spiritual story. But since the inn represents instruction spoiled by false values, the manger had to be used. Horses eat there, and a horse represents the true understanding. So the manger represents instruction directly from the Word itself, which is seen and understood. When we read the Word and see it for ourselves, then the Lord appears to us. We see His face. We “see this great thing which has come to pass, which the Lord has made known unto us.”

It was as this truth that the Lord came down to earth. The heavenly truths He made known at His coming, and revealed in fullness in His second coming are the way to see His face. They are called “the way of truth” in the Writings (*Arcana Coelestia* 2034); and through them alone can we find the Lord.

Earlier we discussed the Lord’s birth two thousand years ago. How could He come to mankind when mankind had filled up the spiritual inn with things which shut Him out? Yet still He came. From His love He found a new way. He came and taught us directly Himself. And when we understand what He has said, then there in a manger, in those truths, we find the infant Lord.

But this tells a tale also of His coming inside of our minds. For even today we too have a spiritual inn—our natural mind. Isn’t it true that even in the minds of those who believe in Him in His church today, there are times when there is little room for Him? Ideally our natural minds ought to grow up with the principles of spiritual things learned side by side with natural things, but the spiritual governing the natural. Often it does not happen. The natural mind becomes filled with all the desires and needs and excitements of the world. There just is little room for the truths of heaven. Or if there is room, those truths are spoiled by harsh or greedy values.

We grow up in a world which places tremendous stress on external delights and accomplishments. And we have in us a quick response to these things. We are taught by so many influences to think of ourselves first and consider the problems of others only after we are satisfied: We yearn to enjoy forbidden delights because the world thinks they are all right. We acknowledge only those neighbors who agree with us and who are like us. We harbor a secret contempt for idealism and religious belief. And we are made vulnerable by many misconceptions. These weaknesses even permeate the things we have learned from the church itself.

Sometimes we look at our religious thoughts and we are not very proud of them. They seem rather harsh and full of self.

At first, the inn of our minds can be closed to the Lord also. There is no room. He should be there. But “the inn” within us is filled up with more exciting things, that crowd out or exclude charity.

But in His infinite patience, the Lord prepares a manger in each one of us. It is the understanding of truth. It is taken straight from the Word itself. We have been learning some truth and understanding it, right from our childhood. And those truths which have been touched with the affection of heaven He stores up in a secret place where they cannot be hurt. This kind of truth is poorly regarded by us at times. We are not terribly interested in it as we walk down the street and plan enjoyment or accomplishment. And maybe we don't question our ethics too closely. It is in mercy that the manger is such a lowly place in our minds at times. In Bethlehem, what would the rulers have thought if they had heard of a dramatic and fantastic birth in some palace of the King of the Jews? They would have sought to kill Him. But no one at that time thought of molesting an apparently humble baby of a carpenter and his wife. The newborn child was safely laid in a manger, even though He spelt death to the kind of rule they loved. All too often we think little of the Word, in our worst moments. Yet the Lord lets it grow in its little-regarded corner. He keeps it separate, until our minds are ready.

This place of the Lord's birth is one of the reasons why we count New Church education—in our homes and in our churches and schools—as something so precious. For a New Church school and a New Church home must do many things. But maybe if we try to instill a love both of looking to the Word itself and trying to understand it; and if we try to instill it at an early age, then we are doing our part in preparing a manger with our children. In that place alone, the Lord can be born in them. We may fail as parents or teachers in many areas. But if a sense of the Lord's presence in His Word is communicated through our efforts, then the very essential of our use has been performed. We are often afraid when we look at our children. We see that their minds are drawn terribly strongly, even as ours were at their age, to worldly delights. We might even feel that the inns of their natural minds are being filled to capacity with worldly concerns, with shallow concepts and values. Until finally there isn't much place for the uplifting ideals of charity. Yet if we have labored faithfully, we may have hope that we have done just a tiny bit to help. Thus the Lord may build that humble sanctuary in their minds where in time He Himself, His charity, may be laid.

This too is why we try to teach children in a sphere of innocence. We hope to control our own rebelliousness or pride when we teach. We strive to have a sphere of holiness and of worship in

our homes and school when we read the Word. For those truths of innocence which are accepted in our most tender moments are the swaddling clothes in which the infant Lord is surrounded. Truths learned in innocence, in our most receptive moments, are laid up by the Lord just for this time. Thus ultimately He may come as the spirit of charity, into our minds.

As adults we see our own minds drawn very strongly by loves which are far from heaven. However, we hope that through some reverence for the Word in its firm, clear teachings we may have a manger stored up there which can receive the Divine birth. For if the manger is there, then when we perform sincere repentance, the Lord comes and draws to Himself those good and precious feelings which we have in us. They are the shepherds, the truths of good which first see the infant Lord. That remnant of sincerity in our hearts which causes us to go about good works, even in the night, is the spiritual shepherd. It is brought by light from heaven to serve charity, and to spread the sense of charity throughout the mind. For remember that the shepherds spread abroad the knowledge of the Lord's birth. And they caused wonder in all who heard of it.

How little do we understand the Divine mercy! We ourselves may look at someone who seems to possess no good, whose thoughts and feelings seem without moral principle or good intention. And we either feel sorry for her/him, or outraged at the hurt she or he does to others. Yet though untold millions are just like that, and we ourselves may have secret loves which are more than suspect; though we may have closed the natural mind, saying it is full enough already; yet for each of us the Lord provides a manger. He prepares swaddling clothes. He sends shepherds to witness the birth, and to carry the glad tidings. Truths from the Word itself, learned and understood—truths learned with a sense of holiness and in innocence—truths which lead to some good—these are the things He has prepared toward the great event of His birth. This is the message of His birth, at Christmas or any other day which might be called “this day.” “For unto you is born this day, in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”