

The Birthplace of the Lord

by the Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss

*And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths,
and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

(Luke 2:7)

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.

If it had it pleased the Lord, He could have been born in the greatest splendor and “been laid in a bed adorned with precious stones” (*Apocalypse Explained* 706). But to what effect? He would have been born among those who cared nothing for His doctrine and who did not love Him. Instead, 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 forever treasure what sophisticated rulers would have disdained.

The Lord 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 the merely selfish, just as it would be considered a very poor place to lay a new-born baby by the worldly, 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 us 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 excluded 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.

But over the centuries this stopped being the case. The inn became a place of self-gratification. People stored all their affections for worldly things there, 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 neither Mary, nor Joseph, nor Jesus could fit into the inn. Mary represents the innocent affection of truth. Such innocence had no place, for it loves true values. Joseph represents the good of a true understanding. Such understanding would be obedient to the Word. And Jesus Himself represents the charity which is God with us. None of these qualities could find room in a place where self was 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 around Him those few blessed affections able to worship Him. And they could carry the good tidings of His birth to the world.

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 from a manger, 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 its truths 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” (Luke 2:15). It was as truth that the Lord came down to earth. The heavenly truths He made known through 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 Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church (*Arcana Coelestia* 2034). Through them alone, we can find the Lord.

Earlier we discussed the Lord’s birth two thousand years ago. How could He come to people when they 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 said, then there in a manger—in those truths—we find the infant Lord.

But this is also a tale about His coming inside of our minds. For we, too, have a spiritual inn—our natural mind. And isn’t it true that even in the minds of those who believe in Him 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 with the spiritual governing the natural. Often this does not happen. The natural mind becomes filled with all the desires and needs and excitements of the world. There is little room left for the truths of heaven. Or if there is enough room, those truths are often spoiled by harsh or greedy values.

We grow up in a world which places tremendous stress on external delights and accomplishments. And in us we have a quick response to these things. So many influences teach us 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.

So the “inn” within us is filled up with seemingly more exciting things, which crowd out or exclude charity and leave no room for the Lord. But in His infinite patience, the Lord prepares a manger in each one of us. This is the understanding of truth. It is taken straight from the Word itself. We have all learned and understood some truth, right from our childhood. And the Lord stores up those truths which have been touched with the affection of heaven 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 plan our accomplishments or pleasures. And maybe we don’t question our ethics too closely. It is in mercy that the manger has such a lowly place in our minds at times. What would the rulers of the time have thought if they had heard of a dramatic and fantastic birth of the King of the Jews in some palace? 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 many then 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 in the New Church we consider religiously-based education—in our homes, churches and schools—as so important and so precious. If we try to instill a love of looking to the Word itself and of trying to understand it from an early age, then we are doing our part in preparing a manger within our children. In that place alone, the Lord can be born in them. If a sense of the Lord’s presence in His Word is communicated through our efforts, then the very essential of our use as parents and teachers has been performed. Sometimes we feel afraid when we look at our children. We see that their minds are drawn terribly strongly to worldly delights, even as ours were at their age. We might even feel that the inns of their natural minds are being filled to capacity with worldly concerns, with shallow concepts and values, so that 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 so that the Lord may build that humble sanctuary in their minds, where in time He may find room.

This too is why we should 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 when we read the Word. For those truths of innocence, which are accepted in our most tender moments, are represented by the swaddling cloths by which the infant Lord was surrounded. Truths learned in innocence, in our most receptive moments, are laid up by the Lord in our minds just for this time.

As adults, we recognize that our own minds are 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 which can receive the Divine birth. For if the manger is there in our minds, then when we perform sincere repentance, the Lord comes and draws those good and precious feelings which we have in us to Himself. These feelings are like the shepherds—the truths of good which first see the infant Lord. The remnant of sincerity in our hearts that causes us to do good works, even in the night, is a spiritual shepherd. It is brought from heaven to serve charity, and to spread the sense of charity throughout the mind. Remember that the shepherds spread abroad the knowledge and wonder of the Lord's birth.

How little we understand the Lord's Divine mercy! When we look at someone who seems to possess no good, whose thoughts and feelings seem without moral principle or good intention, we may either feel sorry for her or him, or outraged at the hurt she or he does to others. Yet, although there are untold millions who are just like this, although we ourselves have secret loves which are more than suspect, although we may have closed our natural minds (saying they are 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 that are learned and understood, truths learned with a sense of holiness and in innocence, truths which lead to some good—these are the things the Lord has prepared in us toward the great event of His birth. And this is the message of His birth, at Christmas or indeed on any other day: "THERE IS BORN *TO YOU THIS DAY* IN THE CITY OF DAVID A SAVIOR, WHO IS CHRIST THE LORD" (Luke 2:11).

Amen.