



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Midnight Mass 2018

A cold, and not too cleanly, manger?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Through the days leading up to Christmas, in countless nativity plays the world over, centre stage is occupied by an assortment of makeshift livestock, shepherds in tea towels of various vintages, exotically dressed Magi bearing preposterous gifts, tinsel-swathed hosts of cherubim and seraphim, blue-veiled Marys and brown-clothed Josephs - the most enormous cast of extras, upon whom endless rehearsals have been inflicted since September and whose frazzled parents have spent sleepless nights perfecting the latest in designer star wear.

Much less attention is usually given to the manger, however.

Quite often it has been 'mislaid' and a new one has to be hastily cobbled together at the last minute, or it is discovered almost too late to be missing a leg or, worse still, its much-needed straw - which everyone is convinced is safely stowed away in a particular cupboard or cubby hole - but evidently isn't!

Yet, the manger is itself a key player in the events we celebrate on this holy night, and in the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth the manger is mentioned no fewer than three times and the swaddling bands in which which Jesus is wrapped twice.

In his poem *In the Holy Nativity of our Lord*, the largely forgotten English Metaphysical Poet, Richard Crashaw who lived during the first half of the seventeenth centuryⁱ asks if *A cold, and not too cleanly, manger* really is the

best that the poor world can produce to provide a bed for “the starry stranger”.

A manger: a feeding trough, not a designer *SilverCross* or *Mamas and Papas* feeding trough mind you, but a simple rough-hewn indentation gouged into the rock of one of the hastily borrowed cave-houses of Bethlehem.

The maker of the universe, the creator and sustained of all that is and has been and all that ever will be, first lays his head not on silken sheets in a golden crib but in a well-used animal’s feeding bowl.

He who was and is and is to come, the Alpha and Omega, is revealed to poor shepherds in the backwater that was Bethlehem, wrapped in strips of roughly torn cloth, lying in a borrowed manger.

St John Chrysostom, the fourth century theologian, put it like thisⁱⁱ:

The Ancient of days becomes a new born infant. He who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger. And He who cannot be touched, who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of men. He who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infants’ bands . . . ignominy becomes honour, infamy is clothed with glory and total humiliation is now the measure of his Goodness.

The manger and the swaddling bands are not just colourful incidents in a Christmas story, but important elements in the story of Redemption.

Like the Magi-gifts of Gold and Frankincense and Myrrh, the manger and the swaddling bands embrace the whole of Salvation History, for the Great Little One who was laid in a borrowed manger and wrapped in swaddling bands is the One who was, thirty years later, laid in a borrowed tomb and wrapped in the binding cloths of death – the One whose flesh is the Bread of Life and whose blood is the cup of eternal salvation.

The story of Christ’s death and resurrection begins here in Bethlehem and the climax of our celebration of Christmas is not placing the Christ Child in the manger of a crib, but receiving bread and wine as we kneel before the altar.

The angels summoned shepherds to the Christ Child laid in a manger;
the crucified, risen, ascended and glorified Christ now summons us to
receive his body and blood in Holy Communion and to become, we
ourselves become, the place where the Christ child is born; the place
where he dwells; those in whom he dies and rises and through whom his
Kingdom comes.

Welcome, all Wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span.
Summer to winter, day in night,
Heaven in earth, and God in man.
Great little One! Whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.

Poor world (said I), what wilt thou do
To entertain this starry Stranger?
Is this the best thou canst bestow?
A cold, and not too cleanly, manger?
Contend, ye powers of heaven and earth
To fit a bed for this huge birth.

Proud world, said I; cease your contest
And let the mighty Babe alone.
The phoenix builds the phoenix' nest,
Love's architecture is his own.
The Babe whose birth embraves this morn,
Made His own bed ere He was born.

Happy Christmas!

**In the Holy Nativity of our Lord, a Christmas poem by
Richard Crashaw**

[CHORUS]
Come we shepherds, whose blest sight
Hath met love's noon in nature's night;

Come lift up our loftier song
And wake the sun that lies too long.

To all the world of well-stol'n joy
He slept; and dreamt of no such thing.
While we found out Heaven's fairer eye
And kissed the cradle of our King.
Tell him he rises now, too late
To show us aught worth looking at.

Tell him we now can show him more
Than he e'er showed to mortal sight;
Than he himself e'er saw before;
Which to be seen needs not his light.
Tell him, Tityrus, where thou hast been,
Tell him, Tityrus, what thou hast seen.

[TITYRUS] Gloomy night embraced the place
Where the noble Infant lay.
The Babe looked up and showed His face;
In spite of darkness, it was day.
It was Thy day, Sweet! and did rise
Not from the East, but from Thine eyes.

[CHORUS] It was Thy day, Sweet! and did rise
Not from the East, but from Thine eyes.

[THYRSIS] Winter chid aloud; and sent
The angry North to wage his wars.
The North forgot his fierce intent,
And left perfumes instead of scars.
By those sweet eyes' persuasive powers,
Where he meant frost, he scattered flowers.

[CHORUS] By those sweet eyes' persuasive powers,
Where he meant frost, he scattered flowers.

[BOTH] We saw Thee in Thy balmy nest,
Young Dawn of our eternal day!
We saw Thine eyes break from Their East

And chase the trembling shades away.
We saw Thee; and we blessed the sight,
We saw Thee by Thine own sweet light.

[TITYRUS] Poor world (said I), what wilt thou do
To entertain this starry Stranger?
Is this the best thou canst bestow?
A cold, and not too cleanly, manger?
Contend, ye powers of heaven and earth
To fit a bed for this huge birth.

[CHORUS] Contend, ye powers of heaven and earth
To fit a bed for this huge birth.

[THYRSIS] Proud world, said I; cease your contest
And let the mighty Babe alone.
The phoenix builds the phoenix' nest,
Love's architecture is his own.
The Babe whose birth embraces this morn,
Made His own bed ere He was born.

[CHORUS] The Babe whose birth embraces this morn,
Made His own bed ere He was born.

[TITYRUS] I saw the curled drops, soft and slow,
Come hovering o'er the place's head;
Offering their whitest sheets of snow
To furnish the fair Infant's bed:
Forbear, said I; be not too bold:
Your fleece is white, but 'tis too cold.

[CHORUS] Forbear, said we; be not too bold:
Your fleece is white, but 'tis too cold.

[THYRSIS] I saw the obsequious seraphims
Their rosy fleece of fire bestow.
For well they now can spare their wings,
Since heaven itself lies here below.
Well done, said I: but are you sure
Your down, so warm, will pass for pure?

[CHORUS] Well done, said we: but are you sure
Your down, so warm, will pass for pure?

[TITYRUS] No, no, your King's not yet to seek
Where to repose His royal head.
See, see, how soon His bloomed cheek
Twixt 's mother's breasts is gone to bed.
Sweet choice, said I! no way but so:
Not to lie cold, yet sleep in snow.

[CHORUS] Sweet choice, said we! no way but so:
Not to lie cold, yet sleep in snow.

[BOTH] We saw Thee in Thy balmy nest,
Young Dawn of our eternal day!
We saw Thine eyes break from Their East
And chase the trembling shades away.
We saw Thee; and we blessed the sight,
We saw Thee by Thine own sweet light.

[CHORUS] We saw Thee; and we blessed the sight,
We saw Thee by Thine own sweet light.

[FULL CHORUS]
Welcome, all Wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span.
Summer to winter, day in night,
Heaven in earth, and God in man.
Great little One! Whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.

Welcome, though nor to gold nor silk,
To more than Caesar's birthright is;
Twin sister-seas of virgin-milk,
With many rarely-tempered kiss
That breathes at once both maid and mother,
Warms in the one, cools in the other.

Welcome, though not to those gay flies,
Gilded in the beams of earthly kings,

Slippery souls in smiling eyes;
But to poor shepherds, home-spun things,
Whose wealth's their flock, whose wit, to be
Well read in their simplicity.

Yet when April's husband showers
Shall bless the fruitful Maia's bed,
We'll bring the first-born of her flowers
To kiss Thy feet and crown Thy head.
To Thee, dread Lamb! whose love must keep
The shepherds, more than they their sheep.

To Thee, meek Majesty! soft King
Of simple graces and sweet loves.
Each of us his lamb will bring,
Each his pair of silver doves;
Till burnt at last in fire of Thy fair eyes,
Ourselves become our own best sacrifice.

ⁱ Richard Crashaw 1612 – 1649.

ⁱⁱ St John Chrysostom, The Nativity Sermon