

## **The Ox and the Ass**

One of the things a priest has to promise when he or she is ordained is to say morning and evening prayer each day. This may seem like a burden but I have found it one of the joys of a priest's life. For one thing, it exposes one to the broad sweep of the Scriptures. There is a two year cycle covering about 80% of the Bible thus preventing one from simply reading one's favourite bits.

So the other day we began the book of Isaiah, all 60 chapters, and in the first paragraph of chapter 1 we read this:

"The ox knows its owner, and the donkey it's master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."

An ox and a donkey? A crib?

And this was written many centuries before Jesus was born.

If you are going to set up a nativity scene at home, or in church, of course you are going to include an ox and an ass are you not? And if anyone ever plans to put on a nativity play with real live people the question soon arises, "Where are we going to get a donkey from?" Though I suspect the ox gets conveniently forgotten.

But scour the gospels which tell of Jesus' birth, nowhere will you find mention of either animal. We get a manger all right, for there was no room at the inn. So Joseph and Mary had to make do with an outhouse. But neither ox nor ass are mentioned by either St Matthew or St Luke.

So how did these creatures get inserted into our crib scenes and why?

It was an early Christian bishop, St Origen, who first made the connection. He spotted those words from Isaiah and thought, "Ah ha! Here is a clear prophecy of Jesus hidden deep in the Jewish Scriptures." Origen, as like so many early Christian writers, wanted to lend credibility to their faith. He was writing in the third century when Christians were still hounded, persecuted and often executed. They were called heretics. They were called atheists as they did not worship the gods. Origen wanted to show that Jesus was the real thing and for that he needed to find him in the Jewish writings: long promised, the fulfilment of history, the expected Messiah. An ox and ass who know their master's crib? Bingo!

In fact everything about the gospel birth stories of Jesus cry out expectation and fulfilment: the magi, the shepherds, the virgin conceiving, a child of the tribe of Judah, a Nazarene, born in Bethlehem, every aspect is seen as prophecy fulfilled. This should not have come as a surprise to anyone who had half an eye open on the writings of their faith.

Our creed contains the phrase, "...in fulfilment of the Scriptures." It is crucial. For Jesus came from long expectation. Everything he was, did and said was built on the solid platform of prophecy anticipating his arrival. So that Simeon, an old man in the Temple, on being shown the child can say, "Lord, now I can depart in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation."

What do we expect from the Scriptures? Our faith teaches us during the season of Advent that Jesus will return. We call this the Second Coming of the Messiah. What will that

mean? It is hard to say. But it means a kingdom revealed, a kingdom that has always existed made visible, hidden things exposed, for good and ill, and judgement.

If prophecy foretold his first coming may it not also his second?

So next time you see a young lady dressed in blue carrying a doll sitting side saddle on a donkey in a nativity parade or scene, remind yourself whence this story came. And be thankful that it is not through the mighty and powerful of this world that the Creator of all works out his purposes, but through the ordinary and humble amongst us: an ox and an ass.

Happy Christmas!

Fr Jeremy Sykes

Vicar of Hellingly and Upper Dicker

Priest-in-Charge of Brightling, Mountfield and Netherfield.