

Sunday 8th December 2024 - Make Room

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- [0 : 0 0] All right, good morning everyone. Morning. Nice to see you today. And just a couple of weeks to go, isn't it, till the big day. And that means we're entering not just the season or in the season of Advent, but we're entering the season of school Christmas nativity plays. And we're holding our own nativity play, our own instant rehearsal-free version here on Christmas Eve as part of our Christmas special at 4.30 on Christmas Eve. So all are invited to that one. So do come along or even get dressed up if you wish. All ages can get dressed up and join in. It should be a lot of fun for that one. But before that, a lot of schools over the next week or two, they're gearing up for their plays, which means that the casting for those all-important parts has already taken place. Indeed, I don't know if you've seen a particular clip that's been doing the rounds again online. It's a clip of how one particular boy told his mum about the part that he'd been given in his school nativity play. So we'll see how he breaks this news to his mum. That's what I am for the nativity. I'm a classic one. Classic role, is it? Classic part? Yeah. Joseph? No.
- [1 : 1 8] One of the three wise men? No. One of the innkeepers? No. But it's a classic part? Yeah. Okay. You tell me then, because... I'm door holder number three. I'll be holding doors. That's amazing. Holding doors for who? Probably Joseph and Mary. Oh my gosh. Were you pleased when they said that? Yeah. What did you do? And I was like, I'm a door holder. Get in there. Let's go. Yes. Whoa. And maybe, because there's no room, I'll probably be just there, be like, just coming in and then I'll just slam the door in the face. Is that your style role? Maybe. I'll probably be dressed up as a door. Hmm. Classic. The old door holder number three part.
- [2 : 1 8] Well cast there. And as he said, he may just get to slam the door in Mary and Joseph's face when they needed somewhere to stay. Indeed, one of the key themes, I guess, of so many nativity plays is that when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem to register for the census that had been called, we're told there was no room for them in the inn. And so the tradition goes, the best that Mary and Joseph can find is a stable in which to give birth, illustrating the idea perhaps that from the word go, it seems, you know, shunted out to the shame and dirt of a barn. Jesus, from his birth, was rejected and turned away. And yet if we explore what Luke's gospel actually says, it would seem this no room at the inn idea and the rejection that's associated with it. Well, it's almost the exact opposite, it seems, of what really happened at Jesus's birth. Indeed, part of what I'm going to share this morning may sound familiar if you've been with us for a little while because we have looked at this before. But no apologies, really, for repeating that today. Because for me, what we're going to look at, I would say, is at the heart of what Advent and Christmas really means for us and for our world.

[3 : 50] And what we'll look at, it revolves around one particular Greek word that the writer of the gospel, Luke, uses in his account of Jesus's birth.

It's the word kataluma. Kataluma. Greek word kataluma. You know we like to say some Greek here, don't you? If you've been with us. You want to say the Greek word kataluma with me?

A one, two, three. Kataluma. Beautiful, beautiful. Okay, now, when Luke's gospel, which was written in Greek, is translated into English, this Greek word kataluma, it's usually translated as inn.

You know, some kind of hotel or B&B; where you would pay for lodging. And because of that translation, that there was no room for Mary and Joseph at the inn, this whole subplot has emerged in nativity plays involving an innkeeper and a stable.

But, spoiler alert this morning, actually, neither an inn nor a stable are mentioned in the gospel stories of Jesus's birth.

[5 : 04] Why? Well, because this Greek word kataluma, it doesn't actually mean inn very often at all. And we know that because there's another perfectly decent, far more common Greek word, which the writer Luke uses in another story in his gospel when he is talking about an inn.

It's this word, pandokion. You want to have two Greek words this morning on your tips of your tongues? A one, two, three. Pandokion. Lovely. All right.

Now, this is the word that Luke uses when he's telling the story of the Good Samaritan and how the man who was beaten up, what a Samaritan pays for him to go to a hostel or an inn, pays for him to stay there.

So it would seem, if there was no room for Mary and Joseph at an inn in Bethlehem, Luke would have used the same word that he uses in his other story about an inn in the Good Samaritan.

He would have used the word pandokion, not kataluma. So what does kataluma actually mean? Well, let's have a look at the passage in question, the story of Jesus' birth as told in Luke's gospel.

[6 : 24] And as we watch this, let's listen out for the word that's used at the end of the passage instead of in. So here's our reading for today from Luke chapter 2, verses 1 to 7.

In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to Bethlehem, town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.

And she gave birth to her firstborn. A son.

[7 : 48] She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. Did you hear it?

At the end there, the words. And this is the key verse in which it appears. So Mary, she, wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Indeed, kataluma, this word, usually means guest room. And we know this because on the only other occasion when this word appears in Luke's gospel, this kataluma word, well, the only other occasion it appears is at the time of Jesus's last supper.

And Jesus himself helpfully defines for us what exactly a guest room, a kataluma, is. So Luke, for example, he records Jesus as telling his disciples, Peter and John, to go and ask a particular man this.

Where is the guest room? The word is kataluma in Greek. Where I may eat the Passover with my disciples. He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished.

[9 : 07] Make preparations there. So for Luke, kataluma is not a commercial inn or bed and breakfast at all.

Rather, it's an upstairs room. We might say a guest room, an extra room, maybe a spare bedroom, in other words. You see, in Jesus' time, in his day and age, and even to this day in the Near and Middle East, hospitality, you know, this ability to welcome and accommodate visitors and guests, hospitality was and is a non-negotiable virtue in local culture.

Indeed, hospitality is a matter of honour. So when a friend or a relative or even a stranger comes to your door, custom and culture dictates that you invite them in.

And if they need a place to stay, if they've got nowhere to stay that night, well, even the poorest of homes would have a room or a space or even just a sort of curtained off area, perhaps sometimes a kind of shelter on the roof.

You know, no matter how simple, every home would have had a space to accommodate a guest. Hence this kataluma word for guest room.

[10 : 31] It was a common thing in homes. Now, given that a kataluma, a guest room in a house, is mentioned in the Christmas story, I guess it begs the question, whose house, whose home is it talking about?

Well, we don't know. We don't know. We're not told that detail. But a decent guess would be that it was the home of some of the relatives of Joseph.

You know, since Joseph had returned to Bethlehem, the town of his birth for the census, it's likely that he'd still have some relatives living there, you know, who might put him and Mary up for a while.

And I say for a while because actually there's no indication in Luke's gospel that Joseph and Mary are in this kind of frantic last minute dash to find somewhere for Mary to give birth while her contractions are happening and all that kind of stuff.

No, that's become a familiar thing in nativity stories, not the contractions. That would be inappropriate, I guess, with school-aged kids. But you know what I'm saying. This kind of last-minute frantic dash, that's one of the themes of so many nativity plays.

[11 : 41] But in fact, Luke says this. He says, Joseph went up from the town of Nazareth to Bethlehem to register with Mary, who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.

Now, I don't know about you, but that sounds to me like Mary and Joseph had already arrived in Bethlehem and been there for some time.

And then while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. And so the most likely nativity story is that Joseph and the pregnant Mary had already been taken in by some of Joseph's extended family and indeed welcomed in to the heart of their family home.

You know, despite Mary being pregnant out of wedlock, the family, the wider family, they would, of course, be expected to take her and Joseph in because hospitality was such a high key value.

And if we doubt that, let's think about it for a moment because we're told elsewhere that Mary had already stayed with her relative Elizabeth for three months in the early days of her pregnancy.

[13 : 03] So it doesn't make sense that Mary's family would have taken her in while pregnant, but Joseph's would have rejected her when the time came to give birth. And in any case, I don't think the scandal at the time of being pregnant and unmarried would have outweighed the obligation, even the basic humanity, of looking after family members, particularly one who's about to give birth.

And so when the time came for Mary to give birth, I'd suggest that the birth took place not in a stable as some skanky last resort, but in the heart of this family home.

Now, why can we say that Jesus' birth took place in the heart of a family home? Well, because of that verse that we looked at earlier, in that having given birth to Jesus, again, we're told this, that she wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them.

Now, looking at this verse in a bit more detail. Firstly, I guess, why was there no guest room, no kataluma available for them? Well, it was seen because it was already occupied by people, occupied, no doubt, by other guests, by other extended family members of Joseph's, you know, perhaps elderly relatives, perhaps other children or grandchildren who'd also turned up for the census.

You know, the Greek term that Luke uses literally says there was no space in the guest room. That kind of implies cheek to jowl, kind of pretty full, busy home.

[14 : 52] But then secondly, what's this about placing Jesus in a manger? Seems quite a random detail to include. Using a feeding trough, probably a stone, hay-lined cot.

Well, I think it's an incredibly revealing detail, one that I think Luke puts in on purpose. And it's especially revealing when we understand what homes in Jesus' day and age were like, because the manger, this feeding trough, would probably have been inside the house on the ground floor.

The many homes at the time would probably have been a bit like this. You know, simple, two-roomed, two-storey houses with an upper level for sleeping and for guests.

That's where the Kataluma would have been. But then inside on the ground floor, however, that was the main living area where food would be cooked and everyday lives would be shared.

And yet this ground floor, as this sort of cutaway image shows, that was also the place where the family's animals would be brought in overnight and kept.

[16 : 11] So sheep, goats, chickens, maybe a donkey, maybe a cow, if you were lucky. All the livestock that the family owned would be brought in to the ground floor overnight. The thinking was, it seems, that by keeping the animals inside, they'd be safe from predators and thieves, but they'd also act on a cold night as an albeit smelly kind of central heating.

You know, the heat from these animals would rise up to where you're sleeping and keep you warm. And with these animals, though, needing to be fed overnight and inside the house, that's why mangers were found on the ground floor inside many homes.

Mangers like this one, which is a stone one, again, from the time of Jesus. And so this ground floor in a home was probably the best place for Mary to give birth in an otherwise busy home.

You know, helped out by female relatives or the village midwife would have been called in. You know, within that culture, the men banished upstairs or outside while the birth actually happened.

and then with a manger, you know, just a couple of yards away probably in easy reach. Well, that would have made an obvious makeshift cot to lay a child in.

[17 : 35] Yes, it would have been noisy and smelly and messy and there may have been some animals wandering around like that picture postcard idea that we get. But Jesus, I want to suggest, far from being rejected at his birth, would have been born in the living room of a humble family home taking his place in the heart of family life.

And that to me is quite a special thought that Christmas and what it's all about is actually about inviting and welcoming Jesus into the heart of our homes, into the heart of our lives.

You know, even if or especially if our homes are noisy or busy or messy or makeshift, the fact that Jesus was probably born into that kind of setting, well, that for me is what this hope and peace and joy and love of Jesus coming to be God with us is all about.

What's more, I'd suggest the fact that Jesus is placed in a manger, you know, aside from informing us about the home setting into which Jesus was born, well, that's significant on another level as well.

You see, I think Luke includes this detail about a manger, a feeding trough, because he wants us to see that from the word go, Jesus' life is associated with feeding, you know, feeding others, nourishing them.

[19 : 13] Indeed, the place named Bethlehem means house of bread and it's a theme which plays throughout Jesus' time on earth. So, you know, there's multiple stories of Jesus involved with bread, such as multiplying loaves of bread to feed the 5,000 on one occasion, to feed the 4,000 on another.

Tells us to pray as we'll do later. for our daily bread in the Lord's prayer, but also he calls himself the bread of life, calling us to come to him for spiritual sustenance.

What's more, I think Luke is such a clever writer because as we saw, the only other time he uses this kataluma, guest room word, is as a description of the venue for Jesus' last supper.

Another guest room, this time in Jerusalem, known as the upper room in church tradition, where Jesus broke bread with his disciples on the night before he died.

I think Luke wants us to see and make a connection, you know, a symmetry, continuity even, between Jesus' birth on the one hand and Jesus' death on the other.

[20 : 28] At his birth, therefore, you know, since the guest room, the kataluma, was already full of people, Jesus is probably born downstairs in the living room.

An apt name if ever there was one, perhaps. But then on the night before he died, Jesus arranges for his last meal to take place upstairs in a kataluma, described on this occasion by Luke as a large guest room.

It's probably quite a posh home, you know, big enough to accommodate everyone, a borrowed home that Jesus arranges. You know, Luke's way, perhaps, of indicating that the mission for which Jesus had come into this world was now being completed upstairs and downstairs, you know, on every level, if you like.

But then alongside also Luke's inclusion of this manger detail, indicating that Jesus is the one we're a feed of, Jesus himself underlines that truth by then telling us that in this other kataluma on the night before he died, famously told this, that Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying, this is my body given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. Multiple levels of meaning on that, but in other words, remember to keep feeding on me and my love and give of yourselves to others so that they too may feed on me through your love for them.

[22 : 01] You see, the Christmas story I don't think is actually about grumpy innkeepers or a distant stable or even about a rejected Jesus.

Jesus at all. And whether downstairs or upstairs, in the living room or the guest room, whether in the manger or around the table of the Last Supper, the truth, I would suggest, is that Jesus came to be Emmanuel, you know, God with us in every room, in every area of our lives.

and from birth to death to now, he invites us to feed on the reality of his presence with us. That's why, I think, having visited the baby Jesus, we're told that the shepherds could go away glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen because they knew that Jesus had come into the heart of everyday homes like theirs, into the heart of their everyday lives.

That's on one extreme, but on the other one with the wise men, you know, we're told this, that on coming to the house, notice that, they saw the child and they bowed down and worshipped him.

Worshipped him because although Jesus had come to the lowliest in society like the shepherds, he'd also come to invite the richest in society to lay down their treasures, you know, to lay down their lives before him.

[23 : 36] And that, I would suggest, is the invitation for each of us in this Advent and Christmas season. Yes, to rejoice and worship at the wonder of Jesus coming to be God with us.

us, but also to invite Jesus to take his place in every room, you know, in every area, in every aspect of our lives.

And I want to say this morning, if you have never asked Jesus in to your life, well, today is as good a day as any to do just that.

You know, even where you're sitting right now, you can invite Jesus to take his place in the heart of your home, in the heart of your life. You don't need any special words, you don't need a set prayer, you know, we can each just simply, quietly, ask God to be with us in every room, in every area of our lives.

and that, I would suggest, is how all this ties together. As we ask Jesus in, that's where we get these gifts of peace and joy and hope and love.

[24 : 54] And one final thought, maybe to tie all this together, one of the last things that Jesus is recorded as saying in the Bible comes in the book of Revelation where he says this, he says, look, says Jesus, I stand at the door and knock.

if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and we will share a meal together as friends.

Now that sounds like a pretty good promise to me. And indeed, my prayer for you and for me, for us, this Advent and this Christmas time, is that we would make room and we would invite Jesus into the heart of our homes, our lives, both now and always.

Amen. Amen.