

OK, your response is ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! Hodie Christus Natus est! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! Today Christ is born! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! Hodie Salvator apparuit! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! Today the Savior has appeared! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA!

Many years before anti-discrimination laws were in effect, Mrs. Rosenberg was stranded late one night at a fashionable resort on Cape Cod – one that did not admit Jews. The desk clerk looked down at his book and said, “Sorry, no room. The hotel is full.” The lady said, “But your sign says that you have vacancies.” The desk clerk stammered and then said curtly, “You know that we do not admit Jews. Please try the other side of town.” Mrs. Rosenberg stiffened noticeably and said, “I’ll have you know, I have converted to your religion.” The desk clerk said, “Oh, yeah, let me give you a little test. How was Jesus born?” “He was born to a virgin named Mary in a little town called Bethlehem,” she replied. “Very good,” replied the clerk. “Tell me more.” “He was born in a manger.” “That’s right,” said the hotel clerk. “And why was he born in a manger?” Mrs. Rosenberg said loudly, “Because some idiot behind a hotel desk wouldn’t give a Jewish lady a room for the night! Any more questions?”

That Jesus was born in a barn, are at least something like a stable, is a staple of our Christmas celebrations. Every nativity set features a barn with animals. And it’s a great story! How many of us put on old bathrobes and wrapped up a baby brother in a dishtowel, using Grandma’s cane for a shepherd’s crook and paper crowns from BURGER KING to create shepherds, kings, the infant Christ – and voila – the nativity play we all love!

This is a good thing – we’re SUPPOSED to put ourselves into the biblical stories. But the story we tell creates a guide, like that shining star that’s a part of the Christmas story, for the path we take in life.

Now what could happen to us if we questioned that picture on the front of the Christmas card? We might be surprised.

In 1584, a professor named Francisco Sanchez de Las Brozas, better known as El Borcense, was turned in to the Spanish Inquisition by his students. That’s rather extreme to get out of going to class! But they turned him in on a charge of heresy. El Borcense was a philologist. He taught the history and meaning of words.

So, what did he teach that was so heretical that he fell into the clutches of the dreaded and notorious Inquisition, an organization with a license to torture, maim or burn heretics alive?

Simply this. El Borcense openly criticized the depictions of the nativity in church paintings, so my homily might get ME in trouble! He insisted the language of Luke 2:7 was very clear. He taught that the gospels did not say Jesus was born in a stable because some innkeeper had a heart of stone. No, properly translated, Luke told us Jesus was born in Joseph’s house in Bethlehem. When it was time for Mary to give birth, she was moved to the single-room main floor in that house – a space that housed both people and animals – because the spare room built for Joseph and Mary on the roof wasn’t big enough for the labor and birth. The thing is, El Borcense was probably right. And I feel safe because there is no more Spanish Inquisition!

The problem is the Greek word that’s translated as “inn” in Luke 2. What is meant by that word? We’re not talking about the Hilton, the Marriott or Motel 6, where they would have left the light on for Joseph and Mary. The word in question is *katalyma*. Its root means “unloosing,” as in a traveler unpacking

belongings. (“The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem: *Katalyma* in Luke 2:7,” Stephen C. Carlson, NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES 56, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 326-342) It is also used in both Mark’s and Luke’s gospels to describe the upper room where the Last Supper takes place. (Mk 14:14; Luke 22:11)

This fits with what we know of the typical Palestinian home, which was a single large room, with a lowered level for the animals. All the sleeping and cooking and home-life took place on this lower level. The animals were there because they were an essential part of the family economy. They may have been shepherded to pasture during the day but during the evening they would share the main level with the people. They were fed in a feeding trough which, of course, served as a bed for the newborn Jesus.

When the family expanded, a new room would be built on the roof, which was made accessible through either an outdoor staircase or an indoor ladder.

Which brings up the other matter that’s important. People registered in their hometown for the census. It makes no sense for Joseph of Nazareth to have to travel 3 days to Bethlehem in order to register, but it makes a whole lot of sense for Joseph of BETHLEHEM, engaged to an unexpectedly pregnant girl from Nazareth, to bring her back to the family home.

Joseph likely lived in Bethlehem. He was a Bethlehem boy engaged to a Nazareth girl. His family evidently built a small room on the roof for the newlyweds, but when it was time for Jesus to be born the room was too small for childbirth, so they moved downstairs, and then used the family manger for his bed.

Most experts in the Greek New Testament or the archaeology of first-century Judah have known this. They’ve understood the building patterns of the houses in first-century Bethlehem. They’ve understood the words. Yet for the most part, most modern translations stick with the idea that there were inns, innkeepers and a stable involved. So how SHOULD Luke 2:7 read? Perhaps something like this: She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger because there wasn’t enough room in their apartment for her to give birth.

OK, point 2. So does this really matter? The Church is not about to ban nativity sets in our churches nor insist that all of our Christmas cards be redesigned.

But, yes, it does matter. It matters in this way: For centuries we’ve criticized the innkeeper as being self-centered and unable to make room for Mary and Joseph far from home in a confusing town during a busy time, while really, the story is about something everyone of us constantly has to do as a family. As a family, we are forever being inconvenienced by the reality of simply being a family. We have to take care of our own, and revert to Plan B whenever it is necessary. Everyone has to be ready to adjust our lives however it is needed.

And it matters a lot when extended family gather at holidays. Especially if you have been put out of your room and onto the couch this Christmas because grandma and grandpa have to have a bed! Or that you are NOT going to be able to stay up so late partying this Christmas because you will wake the baby! We adjust; we make room. Nikos Kazantzakis wrote: “God is not found in monasteries, but in our homes. Wherever you find husband and wife, that’s where you find God; wherever children and petty cares and cooking and arguments and reconciliation are, that’s where God is too. The God I’m telling about, the domestic one, not the monastic one, that’s the real God.” We are all meant to accommodate the dramas that unfold in our families. We can’t always have dinner at the normal time because of soccer or band practice. We may be called to pick up children from school because they are sick. We end up being the grandparents

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who are raising their grandchildren. We may become caregivers for parents or grandparents or a single aunt or uncle who can no longer take care of themselves.

And that's just our immediate family. We may be called to stand up for children in our society, and beyond our comfort zone. Then there's our church family. Being a part of the family of Christ means we need to take care of each other, even if we don't always get things our way. We're not always easy to love, but we're called to love and serve nevertheless. Because we discover the presence of Christ in others.

So don't throw out your nativity set. It's too much fun, and probably holds a lot of memories and a lot of prayers.

By the way, just so you know, El Borcense had a powerful patron who got him released from prison. Some years later that patron died, and El Borcense was rearrested. He died during house arrest. So if you mess with a church's outdoor nativity display, don't be surprised if you get into trouble!

But let's agree: We're keeping the Christmas pageant just the way it is, with all its schmaltz and goofs. And the innkeeper has always been such a great part of the story we couldn't do it without him! Keep the nativity sets, and don't worry about how authentic is the portrayal on the Christmas cards we send.

But if we really want to celebrate Christmas, we should live our lives always ready to be flexible when life throws us a curve. Be ready to implement Plan B. Turn the family room into a nursery if necessary. Put a hospital bed in the dining room for someone recovering with broken bones. Real Christmas is inconvenient. Real Christmas is good. Real Christmas is holy. And Christ is found in it all.

ENJOY YOUR CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS! Hodie Christus Natus est! Alleluia! Alleluia! Today Christ is born! Alleluia! Alleluia! Hodie Salvator apparuit! Alleluia! Alleluia! Today the Savior has appeared! Alleluia! Alleluia! (homily adapted from PROCLAIM, Dec 24/25, 2019, p. 1-4)