*“And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:7)*

Greetings! It’s week 5 of our series on Eating Together, and it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas . Yes, Advent is here and our thoughts turn to the story and celebrations of our Saviour’s birth (well, once we’ve sorted the presents, the food, the decorations, the cards, who’s having Uncle Bert this year … help!).

At least, I thought, writing a piece about Eating Together at the start of the festive season would be a doddle, as surely the Bible’s telling of the Christmas story must contain plenty about celebrating around the meal table. But no, not a sausage, let alone pigs in blankets (well, there is a Child in blankets, but that’s another story …).

So, what lead can Scripture give us to provide a Godly slant on Eating Together within our Christmas celebrations? Well, let’s take a trip back to Bethlehem on that first Christmas night, and pay a visit to ‘that’ inn … (I know we’re Methodists, but this really is ‘inn-keeping’ with our theme ).

**A long, long time ago, in a country not so far, far away …**

Imagine the scene: Bethlehem is buzzing, with Jews arriving from all corners of their country (and beyond) to register in the census called by Augustus Caesar. There’s all sorts of commotion going on as people struggle to find lodgings, and the inn is ‘rammed’. Take a look at the harassed innkeeper, trying to cope with demands for another pillow, could I have chips with that?, surely you don’t charge for a bowl to wash your feet?! And you can’t miss that crowd drinking and making enough noise to wake the dead …

Into the midst of all this stumble a bedraggled couple, dirty and exhausted from a long journey (it would probably have taken around 4 days walk from Nazareth). She’s heavily pregnant and, after trudging through the streets of the town finding nowhere to stay, they’re just desperate to ‘crash out’ in the inn. Joseph grabs the innkeeper and pleads with him for a room, but there aren’t any. Feel Joseph’s despair as he tells his story, and how they literally can’t walk another step, so what can they do? The innkeeper is inclined to turn them away but, seeing Mary’s condition, he relents and lets them bed down in the stable where the animals were kept. Hardly a plush room, but there was only one Star that mattered that night …

And into this scene the Saviour of the world was born.

**What would you have done?**

Now imagine yourself as one of the ‘extras’ in this story. You are one of the crowd drinking at the bar. You only notice this scruffy looking couple as they are led past you, having to push through the mêlée to the stables out the back. They are a nuisance; they’re not part of your ‘set’, and can offer nothing to add to your entertainment tonight. Or you are at a meal table with friends; you see this couple and think “gosh, they will let anyone in here these days” or “for pity’s sake shut that door; my food is going cold”.

Perhaps you might be one of the guests in the rooms upstairs. You would probably be oblivious to the needs of these pathetic travellers; even if you were aware, you certainly wouldn’t be sharing your room with them – “why should I? They should have come sooner, it’s their own fault”. And then, of course, there’s the innkeeper. You would have shut the door on them straight off, if only Joseph hadn’t stuck his foot in the doorway first.

And amongst such people – such people as us – the Saviour of the world was born.

**Who are you eating with?**

If only they’d known Whom it was amongst them, how different their attitudes and actions would have been …

It’s easy to see Eating Together as a gathering of friends around the meal table, having a good time enjoying their company and the fine food. But, as always with Jesus, He blows away our preconceptions and gets us to take our view from a quite different (and somewhat uncomfortable!) angle. So he calls us to make our Eating Together at times welcoming, spontaneous, generous and outside our comfort zone – in other words, sharing God’s love to all, through our food.

And He calls us to look around us and think “would I treat you differently and bless you with my hospitality if I thought you were Jesus?”

**So what might you do?**

Well, our re-enactment of this night at the inn has thrown up some challenges! Who do you identify with in that drama? I guess you’ve recognised certain people you know – but I think we have to admit we can see something of ourselves in them too! The one that stands out for me is about people I see as a nuisance and who I’d rather not be there: and a prime example of this is those rough sleepers we see so often these days in our city. What comes to mind as I write this is Jesus’ command to his disciples at the feeding of the 5,000: “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat” (Matt 14:6). So I pray that next time I come across some poor soul in that position I will summon up the courage to engage with them and offer to get them a snack and a warm drink (challenge me as to how I got on!). Ok, it’s not much, but it’s a start, and who knows how Jesus might multiply that small act into something much bigger. Remember, it was in the simple act of breaking bread with those two travellers on the Emmaus road that Jesus revealed himself to them …

What challenge might you set yourself – with God’s help - to make Eating Together a special, even sacred experience for someone this Christmas?

God bless you as you ‘Eat Your Heart Out’ with Jesus and his friends (whoever they might be, and in whatever form it takes) this Christmas. And, as always, we’d love you to share your stories with us – please do!

*Produced by Martyn Read on behalf of the Bents Green Holy Habits Planning Group (Debs Barnett, Glenn Evans, Martyn Read, Graham Wassell, Daphne and John Wilkins).  Holy Habits is "an adventure in Christian discipleship", based on Luke's picture of the early church in Acts 2:42-47.  Find out more* [*here*](https://www.brfonline.org.uk/collections/holy-habits)*.*