



Reflection

The ox and ass and camel

by David Walker

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I've been thinking a lot about camels recently, inspired by my trip across part of Manchester diocese on one last week. The experience taught me that, if nothing else, by the time they reached Bethlehem the Magi would have had sore bottoms. Perhaps my recent ride was why, sat in the cathedral on Sunday night for the last pre Christmas Carol Service in the diary, and hearing again Harold Darke's evocative setting of Christina Rossetti's words, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, one line sprang out: 'The ox and ass and camel, which adore'.

The nativity story is composed around a series of journeys: Mary and Joseph are called from Nazareth; the shepherds are sent down from the hills; the wise men travel from a far land in the east. But some of the figures in the crib scene have made no journey at all. The animals are simply at home, at the end of whatever labours they had been put to that day, in their stable. And Christ is born in their midst.

Perhaps it helps that I'm a Franciscan, but I don't hear Rossetti's words as mere Victorian sentimentality. I believe in the Christ who is 'Saviour of the World'; his mission is not just to pluck human brands from the flames, but to bring the whole created order to its joyful destiny. The biblical account may not specifically mention whether other creatures were

there, but the presence of the manger is a pretty convincing clue. It's in their home that the Son of God chooses to be born. They are the ones who are so blessed that they have no journey required of them before they meet the Saviour. They are ready and prepared to adore him just as they are.

The Anglican *Five Marks of Mission* call us explicitly to combat injustice and to guard God's creation. Whether or not we go as far as St Francis, who would gently remove worms from the path for their safety, the animals among whom Jesus was born serve as symbolic reminders of those imperatives. Reminders too that the world we share with them, whilst marked and marred by sin, is in no state of utter depravity. Rather it remains glorious in the richness of its God-willed diversity, most of all whenever it offers that glory back to him in adoration.

And the animals remind us that sometimes no outward journey is necessary. Christ is here, in our midst, even as we are peaceably at home or engaged in routine. The task is to notice, to let our eyes be no longer blinded by our preoccupations and preconceptions, and to respond. Can we be, as we tuck into Christmas dinner, open presents or anxiously await the start of the TV Christmas special we're so looking forward to, at least as aware of the divine in our surroundings as Rosetti suggests the creatures in the crib scene were?

Then ox, and ass, and camel, and we, might adore.

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