

Animals of the Bible (1) The Ox



In artistic depictions of the Nativity, an ox is frequently shown standing by the manger with an ass. None of the Gospels, however, mention either of these animals as having been present when Jesus was born. There might well have been an ass there, as it was a common beast of burden, used by all kinds of merchants and tradesmen. Why, though, would there have been an ox, an animal used mainly for ploughing and other agricultural purposes, in a stall in the urban surroundings of Bethlehem?

The answer may lie in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 1, verse 3: “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” These so-called “dumb animals”, the prophet is saying, know what is good for them, but the Israelites do not. The ox and ass recognise the person who provides for them and feeds them but God’s people have rebelled against the One who cares for them and nourishes them in body, mind and spirit.

The ox and ass of our carols and Christmas cards remind us, therefore, that the Child in the manger is the One in whom and through whom our deepest needs are met, and they invite us to “come and adore Him, Christ the Lord”. The old legend of the oxen kneeling on Christmas Eve conveys the same message: these animals have something to teach you and me.

The ox is also mentioned in Deuteronomy, chapter 25, verse 4, where we are told, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” When cereal crops were harvested the

sheaves would be spread out on a hard threshing floor and oxen would be driven over the corn again and again so the trampling of their hooves would separate the grain from the straw and chaff. The Israelites were forbidden to put a muzzle on an ox used in this way to stop it taking an occasional mouthful for itself. The Law thus recognised the right of a working animal to have its share of the results of its labours.

This Old Testament rule reminds us of our responsibility towards the other living creatures that share our planet with us. They are not to be exploited mercilessly, but should be treated with kindness and respect.

A prayer:

O Loving Father, we entreat Thee for our fellow creatures, the cattle, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air; beseeching Thee that, recognising always our responsibility towards them, we may learn from them to fulfil our appointed tasks in humility and trustfulness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

(Source Unknown)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: Domenico Ghirlandaio, Adoration of the Shepherds, 1483-85 (Web Gallery of Art, www.wga.hu)