

3. Zimbabwe – Journey to Bethlehem (The Baggage we Carry)

When we met as a planning committee for this weekend back in December I shared my initial ideas about my input and showed people some of the images I was hoping to use. I said that I was having trouble finding an image of a pregnant Mary on a donkey making the transition to Bethlehem and would be grateful if people could be very attentive to the Christmas cards which would soon be flooding through the door to see if they received such a depiction. I was particularly keen to have an African image as we are using several European ones as well as the Indian Dalit Madonna we looked at this morning. In the end I came across this photograph on the internet which is from an Associated Press news report about Zimbabwe. The caption said this: Misheck Bunyira uses a wheelbarrow to take his pregnant wife Janet to the hospital in Epworth, Harare on Wednesday Dec 17. Let's hear the story of Mary's journey to Bethlehem:

LUKE 2:1-7

You'll notice that Luke doesn't say anything about a donkey! For all we know, Mary might have been transported to Bethlehem in a wheelbarrow! However she got there, we can be sure that the journey was frightening, exhausting and difficult.

I have never been pregnant so I don't know what it is like to bear a child – to be constantly carrying that extra weight and wanting to protect this fragile new life from being broken or bruised. But I do know what it is like to be in transition with a lot of baggage!

Before I went to serve as a Mission Partner in Russia I got rid of all my furniture except a coffee table which I was very fond of. This took up temporary residence in my mum's home along with some china and bedding which went in her loft and about thirty plastic crates of books which went in her garage. The Methodist Church would pay for me to ship 1.7 cubic metres of freight out to Russia. That worked out at about 20 large plastic boxes, a couple of suitcases and a back-pack. I

could just about fit all this stuff into my car and took it with me when I went to do my Mission Formation training at the United College of the Ascension in Birmingham.

Because it was the first time that the British Methodist Church had sent a Mission Partner to Russia it was decided that I should do my second term of training in Eastern Europe. I left for Moscow in February 2003 carrying one suitcase – having left my 20 boxes at my Mum's until I had a permanent address to which they could be sent. It was actually not until October that my freight finally reached me and so I lived out of that one suitcase for eight months. I carried it with me from one Moscow apartment to another; from Moscow to Estonia when I had visa problems; from Estonia to London when I still couldn't get a new Russian visa; and then from London back to Moscow via Estonia!

That suitcase was my baby. It was my life. It made me feel warm and joyful and excited. But it was also a burden. I just wanted to get to a place where I could put this suitcase down, give birth to its contents and make a home for them.

When my freight finally did arrive in Pskov, the Russian city where I was to live for the next six years, I spent three days at the Customs Depot before I could get it released. The problem was that I did not have the appropriate registration stamp in my passport and my experiences in Russia of trying to legally register my presence each time I re-entered the country have given me a whole new insight into what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph to go through the registration process in Bethlehem. I want to read to you now an account I wrote from Pskov of what this would have involved if Bethlehem had been a Russian town!

Firstly, they would have to gather together numerous documents. These would have to be original copies with official signatures and stamps. At least two of each would be required. If the wording was not acceptable they would be sent back to Nazareth to start all over again.

Secondly, they would have to carry with them a large amount of cash in order to pay all the fees, bribes and travel/food/accommodation costs along the way. If none of this cash was stolen by pickpockets en route it could still be rejected by the cashier as being too crumpled and creased.

Thirdly, they would have to converse with bureaucrats not only in bureaucratic language but in a language which was not their native tongue. This would be tiring, confusing and stressful.

Fourthly, there would be queues everywhere, with people constantly trying to push in and long hours spent standing and waiting with no toilet or refreshment facilities.

Luke simply skates over the struggle and discomfort which Mary would have experienced both on the journey to Bethlehem and upon her arrival. And it seems to me that this is something we all do. We tend to be more focused on the destination than the journey; on the birth than the pregnancy; on the visa than the application form.

I have often heard people say –especially when they are going on a particularly long journey – that this is just something they have to get through. I find that difficult to understand because I enjoy the process of getting there. I really appreciate the view from the window; the time to reflect on where I have been and where I am going; the whole experience of being neither here nor there but somewhere in between.

However, I also know how stressful and unsettling it is to be in transition – especially when you don't know when or where the journey is going to come to an end and how much longer you have got to bear your heavy load.

Life is a journey. All of us are constantly in transition. We all have baggage – some of it internal, some of it in our handbags! What are the burdens which we need to lay down? And what are we carrying within us which we need to give birth to?

Zimbabwe

1. What is the longest or most difficult journey you have ever been on?
2. Using your imagination/personal experience, what details can you add to Luke's account of Mary's journey to Bethlehem?
3. What is more important for you – the destination or the journey?
4. What burdens are you carrying at the moment?
5. What or who is your "baby"?