



A Christmas Triptych

a set of three festive sketches

with a pretentious title

written by

Alec Shuttleworth

and

Robin Hill

Offered in support of

The Church of Scotland

HIV Programme

Welcome to our sketches!

Each year, we do our best to come up with a sketch which churches can use at “our busy time of year”, the final week of Advent, when ministers and priests have too much to do and not enough time to do it.

It’s great fun to write these little presentations together, and good to know that they are appreciated each year by congregations throughout the British Isles and as far afield as the United States and Australia. Also pleasing is the fact that congregational offerings taken up at the various Christmas services raise much-needed funds for the Church of Scotland HIV Programme, which works through medical, caring, educational and income generating projects with partner agencies around the world, addressing the many challenges posed by HIV in our time.

This year, our offering has grown from one sketch to three, which we hope will fit together as a three-part drama. Feel free to use one, two, or perhaps even all three of them divided up by Christmas music, hymns or readings. You can change the names, the jokes and the language to suit your particular locality.

Christmas is a season when great spiritual truths can be conveyed in unusual ways. May your own variations of these sketches help your congregation grasp the meaning behind the arrival of the child in the manger – sorry, feeding trough.

Enjoy the sketches, have a blessed Christmas, and don’t forget the Church of Scotland HIV Programme (contact details of which are to be found at the end of the sketches).

Yours,

Alec and Robin

Tarbolton and Longniddry, Scotland, September 2010

Part I – At an inn

The cast: Narrator
Mr Reginald Inman (a nice man, mild, timid and slightly hesitant)
Mrs Deirdre Inman (probably very nice once you get to know her)

The scene: *Inman's Inn in Bethlehem. Deirdre is bustling distractedly.*

Narrator: It is Christmas – the very first Christmas – and we find ourselves in a bustling Bethlehem, where everyone is getting just a little vexed.

[Reginald enters cautiously]

Reginald: Hello my love. Are you busy by any chance?

Deirdre: What?

Reginald: Er ... are you busy at all?

Deirdre: “Am I busy at all?” Have you seen it out there? It's like Herod's store on Boxing Day, you idiot. We've never been busier.

Reginald: I suppose it is busy, what with the census and all.

Deirdre: Oh yes. Great Caesar Augustus and his pea-brained idea. *[Deep voice]* “Let’s have a census. Let’s count everyone. But before we count everyone, just for the unremitting fun of it, let’s make them move back to their home town ... all at the same time!”

Reginald: Yes indeed. It certainly appears to have caused quite a kerfuffle.

Deirdre: “Quite a kerfuffle???” It’s a blooming nightmare. Here we are, the only inn in Bethlehem, full to overflowing. And you come in here asking if I’m “busy”.

Reginald: I can see you’re a trifle overwrought. But I was simply wondering if you could pop over to the stable with me for just a moment.

Deirdre: The stable? What for?

Reginald: You remember that young couple we turned away earlier?

Deirdre: No I don’t! We’ve turned away hundreds. This inn’s had more disappointed couples than “Strictly come dancing” with Brucie and his glamorous assistant Salome.

Reginald: But surely you recall that teenager who was great with child.

Deirdre: What ... on earth??? “Great with child?” If you mean pregnant, say “pregnant”!

Reginald: [*Hesitantly*] Turns out ... it’s a bit more serious than just “pregnant”.

Deirdre: Eh?

Reginald: How can I put this? It looks to me somewhat as though the days are accomplished that she should be delivered.

Deirdre: You what?

Reginald: She’s having the baby.

Deirdre: [*Suspiciously*] Where?

Reginald: Er ... in our stable.

Deirdre: What are they doing in our stable?

Reginald: Well, there was nowhere else for them to go.

Deirdre: Oh for pity’s sake! Now look what you’ve done, you great womble. We can’t have a baby born in our stable. We’re not licensed for deliveries (not that sort anyway). What if the health inspector Pharisee comes round? He’d have us shut down quicker than you could say: [*in mocking, impersonating tones*] “Oooh

look, a lovely little newborn baby! How on earth did that get there?" *[Irate]* Honestly Reginald!

Reginald: Oh come, come. No-one's ever going to know. They'll be heading back to Nazareth on their little donkey before you know it.

Deirdre: I'll give you a little donkey if you're not careful matey. *[With resolve]* There's only one thing for it. You'll need to go ... and find a midwife.

Reginald: That is rather the point, Deirdre my dear. After fruitless trawling through the Yellow Scrolls, then taking to the streets myself, I conclude that there is no midwife to be had, neither for love nor money, this side of Bethany and Bethphage. Shepherds? Now that would be a different matter. The town's absolutely crawling with shepherds singing their hearts out. I've even seen some mystical eastern bods on camels. But as for midwives, not a one. So ... I wondered if you would come and help.

Deirdre: Me?

Reginald: Well, you've had a baby. You must know the pack drill.

Deirdre: It is not a "pack drill". And I can't help her. When I was having our baby, I was at the other end. And – need I remind you? – my supportive husband had

fainted flat out on the floor of the West Bank
Infirmery.

Reginald: But Sugarplum, how complicated can it be? You just have to stand there and yell “Puuuuuush!”, don’t you?

Deirdre: Are you trying to be stupid as well as annoying, or is this just my lucky day? There’s more to it than that, you know. Hot water. Clean towels. Four years at university. Not to mention a very big shovel for where the horses have been. Oh, and would you happen to have any swaddling?

Reginald: What’s swaddling?

Deirdre: Right! So no swaddling. Just brilliant. And no crib either.

Reginald: Ah well, I have managed to put some clean straw in the manger.

Deirdre: “The manger?” It’s a feeding trough, for goodness sake. We’ve never called it “a manger”. She’s “great with child”. “Her days are accomplished that she should be delivered”. Suddenly we’ve got “a manger”. What is it with you tonight?

Reginald: *[In frustration]* I don’t know! I don’t know!
Somehow, it just feels ... *[thoughtfully]* important.
The whole world’s in uproar all around. A census.
Everyone travelling. It could hardly be more wrong

for that young couple. She's only a girl, with no-one to turn to in Bethlehem. The timing couldn't be worse. And just at the worst possible moment, maybe the best possible thing's about to happen. ... A baby. ... There's so much at stake in that stable. Even if we are busy.

[Exeunt to quiet Christmas music]

Part II – In a field

The cast: Narrator
Seth, shepherd in chief
Amos, a shepherd
Jedediah, a shepherd
Obadiah, a shepherd
Some sheep that you never actually meet

The scene: *An empty pasture, with Seth scanning anxiously around the horizon.*

Narrator: Still lies the ancient town of Bethlehem and its surrounding pastures. Still beneath the twinkling stars. Still in the cool of the night. Still, still, still. So still, in fact, that you can't even hear the bleating of the sheep. And that, it seems, may not be such a good thing.

[Noises off of approaching shepherds singing the “Gloria, hosanna in excelsis” bit from “Ding dong merrily on high”. Enter Amos, Jedediah and Obadiah, singing loudly in great excitement. They reach Seth and finish their chorus, clapping each other heartily on the back.]

Seth: *[Sarcastically]* Oh, excellent! You're back then.

Jedediah: *[Excitedly]* Seth! Seth! You won't believe what's happened.

Seth: Won't I?

Jedediah: No Seth, you won't. We been to Bethlehem on account of an 'eavenly choir, what told us: "We bring you tidings of great joy. The Saviour of the world has been born. You will find him lying in a manger."

Obadiah: Thought it was really just a feeding trough, wasn't it? Why they calling it a "manger", I wonder?

Jedediah: Normally you would call it a trough, that's true, but when an 'eavenly host says it's a manger, you don't argue. So Obadiah, 'e said, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem to see this thing what has come to pass," which to be honest I thought was a bit high-falutin' for a man who can't even pass his shepherding HNC access course. But still, off we went, me, Obadiah and Amos here.

Obadiah & Amos: *[Singing lustily and with good courage]* "Glo-r-ia, hosanna in excelsis."

Jedediah: An' we saw the baby wrapped in ... what was it again?

Amos: Swaddlin'.

Jedediah: Again, a word I'm not familiar with, but what do I know? I'm just a shepherd.

Obadiah & Amos: *[Singing as before]* “Glo-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-r-ia, hosanna in excelsis.”

Jedediah: Anyway Seth, we gets to this stable, see. And ...
d’you know what, Seth? *[Looking quizzically at Seth]*
’ear! I gets the feeling you’re not entirely caught up in our little story. You look a bit pre-occupied.
Distracted, even.

Seth: Hmm. I wonder if we could find the reason for that?
Let’s start at the beginning, Jedediah, my bonnie lad.
When I clocked off after a long an’ arduous shift, I was ready for a decent kip. A wearying pall of fatigue had swept across my person because I – like a competent shepherd – had been hard at it over the previous 12-and-an-’alf hours, abiding in the fields keeping watch over our flock. If you recall, you and the Chuckle Brothers here took over as per our previously arranged duty roster. But when I awoke expecting (I think, reasonably enough) to see you still abiding in the field watching over our flock ... you wasn’t there.

Jedediah: Well, I explained that.

Seth: Before we get back to your explanation, I wonder if you have perhaps noticed what else isn’t here? Amos? Any ideas?

Amos: Looks pretty much the same as when we left it.

Seth: You spotted anything that might cause us the merest frisson of alarm, Obadiah?

Obadiah: I don't fink so, but as Jed always says, I'm not very bright.

Seth: Come now, don't single *yourself* out here, Obi. Rather, let me ask you all some questions. Question 1: What is it we do for a living?

Obadiah: I know that one! We're shepherds.

Seth: That's right. Question 2: What do shepherds do?

Obadiah: We look after sheep. Ha, ha! I know that one too!

Seth: Well done. And now, going for a glorious hat-trick, it's question 3: Can we see any sheep?

Jedediah: *[In realisation]* Oh.

Amos: Ah. *[Amos wanders off stage, looking for the sheep]*

Obadiah: *[Brightly, and still unaware]* No Seth, I can't see no sheep nowhere. Not a one.

Seth: No, you numbskulls, because they're gone! Scarpered! Trotted off on their little ovine tootsies to seek pastures new, motivated (I shouldn't wonder) by the attractive prospect of an independent lifestyle,

blissfully freed from any inconvenient constraints of modern shepherdin'!

Jedediah: Listen to that Obadiah. Seth's got a touch of the high falutin's himself tonight. Nice use of vocabulary, I must say, coupled with I fine turn of phrase, if I may make so bold.

Seth: Never mind the turn of phrase, what about the sheep? If you'd stayed here, we'd still have our livelihood. But no, I can see what really 'appened. You been down at the inn in Bethlehem, ain't you?

Jedediah: Well yes, as it happens we did pass close by the inn. But no, no! You got it all wrong. There was a great host; an 'eavenly choir of angels.

Seth: Well ... it's possible. I'm not saying it's not possible. But I think there's a fair chance that what you actually saw was an host of heavenly sheep-rustlers disguised as angels who couldn't believe their luck when three great wallies fell for that story o' theirs. *[In parody]* "The saviour of the world is born. In Bethlehem, of all places. In a stable. In swaddling." And what is swaddling anyway?

Jedediah: They was real. The glory of the Lord shone about them and we was sore afraid.

Obadiah: Speakin' personally, I was close to 'aving a nasty accident.

Jedediah: The gaffer angel, 'e said: "I bring you tidings of great joy." And, true to his angelic word, that's exactly what 'e brunged.

Seth: Never mind what 'e brunged ... er, what 'e brought! I'm more concerned with what he's run off with. Namely our sheep. [*Crossly*] First rule of shepherding ... you stay with the flock. First rule!

Jedediah: Well, not necessarily, Seth.

Seth: What?

Jedediah: I could envisage occasions when you might leave the flock. What man of you, having an 'undred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he findeth it? And when he hath(*hesitating now*) founded-ed-eth it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have foundededeth my sheep which was lost.

Seth: Absolute nonsense! Leave the 99 to go looking for the one??? That's not good shepherdin' practice. That sounds to me like the worst possible shepherd.

[*Amos re-enters, quietly rejoining the group.*]

Obadiah: We seen what we seen. They wasn't no sheep rustlers or nothin'. They was angels, Seth. ... They was angels.

Seth: Very well, but where's the sheep?

Amos: [*Casually*] They're over there.

Seth: Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?

Amos: [*Pointing far off, stage left*] They moved over there. Look. You just didn't spot 'em. I reckon you panicked, Seth. Second rule of shepherding ... [*softly*] Don't ... panic.

Seth: Well, alright ... yes, OK. Perhaps I did panic just a little bit. But you didn't ought to have gone off like that.

Jedediah: [*Thoughtfully*] No Seth. No, you're wrong there. When something 'appens like this, you got to go off. Even if I'd lost everything I 'ad tonight, I'd still have gone to see that baby.

Seth: But you seen 'undreds of babies!

Jedediah: Not the Saviour who is Christ the Lord.

Seth: Christ the Lord? How d'you know it is? This country's full of nutters claiming to be the Christ, and

the Romans get them all in the end. So how do you know it is? How can you be sure?

Jedediah: I don't know it is, Seth. I can't be sure. I'm a shepherd. So are you. We don't know everything ... or anything like it. So no, I can't be sure. And if you're right, then it was a silly thing to do. Risking everything, just to pay 'omage at a feedin' trough.

Seth: Right. Well, I accept your apology. We'll say no more about it, shall we? Forget it ever 'appened, eh?

Jedediah: No, Seth. You don't understand. I can't stay silent. I can't forget. ... And yes, of course, I might be wrong. But think, Seth. Think. *[Long pause]* What if I'm right?

[Exeunt to quiet Christmas music]

Part III – Under a star

The cast: Narrator
Wise women: Mrs Cathy Caspar
Mrs Betty Balthazar
Mrs Margaret Melchior

The scene: *Night time in the great outdoors, near Bethlehem.*

Narrator: Around this time of year, we generally hear a lot about Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar those famous travellers from the East. But behind three wise men, we might also expect to find ... three wise women.

[Enter the wise women, carrying travelling bags. Cathy has a map.]

Cathy: *[Exasperated]* What are they up to now?

Betty: Not still looking for that star of theirs?

Margaret: The same bright star we've been following for all these many months.

Cathy: Why are they still looking for it? *[Pointing skywards, a little to the left]* I can see it from here!

Betty: According to my Balthazar, it's not in the right place yet.

Margaret: But Betty, it's in the same place now as it's been since June!

Betty: I know Margaret, but according to Balthazar, it should be pointing somewhere else by now. It should be over some "royal palace" or other. Here's the problem: the only palace around here is [*pointing straight ahead*] in Jerusalem, but the star is definitely right over [*pointing to the left a little*] that little town.

Margaret: What little town would that be?

Cathy: [*Looking at map*] According to the map, it's ... er, let me see ... Oh! ... little town of Bethlehem.

Betty: [*All looking towards Bethlehem*] How still we see it lying there.

Cathy: Yes, Betty. I would agree. Very definitely an atmosphere of deep and dreamless sleep about it.

Margaret: [*Looking directly overhead*] With the silent stars rolling by.

Cathy: [*Pointing above Bethlehem*] All bar that one, which, as the men folk are wont to tell us, is rather stubbornly refusing to shift anywhere near to the palace.

Betty: To the site of a great new king's birth: Jerusalem!

Cathy: [*Excitedly*] Jerusalem!

Margaret: *[Very excitedly]* Jerusalem!

Cathy: *[A bit deflated]* Well ... they're not quite so sure now, are they? I don't know. Why don't they just ask for directions to the new king?

Betty: That's what I've been saying all along Cathy. Honestly! There was any number of people on the road today who would have known the way. We could have asked those shepherds who were doing all that singing. We could have asked that timid little innkeeper we saw running about in a froth, trying to find a midwife. But you know what men are: *[Deep voice in condescending tone]* "No, no, no, my sweet! Once we reach the slip road on to the M ... DLXXIV, we'll make our way to the birth place just fine. You see if we don't." *[Normal voice]* Balthazar! He never asks!

Cathy: Caspar doesn't like asking for directions either: *[Deep voice, with perplexed air]* "I've just spent 249 pieces of silver and 99 pieces of copper on this camel GPS. It's the latest piece of kit. And no, I don't need to look at the manual, thank you very much." *[Normal voice]* Navigation? He can't even navigate his way to the laundry basket with his socks.

Margaret: My Melchior hates asking too. He always says: *[Deep voice with lofty, learned air]* "Dear lady, I have made a lifetime study of the constellations, from Aquarius to

Andromeda; from Pleides to Perseus. Well I know the way before me.” *[Normal voice]* Aye. Right. It’s a wonder we made it to the deserts of Judea at all. I had my money on Vladivostok.

Cathy: Here, Betty, do you think they’ll have shops in Jerusalem?

Betty: Shops? Yes they’ve got a great big huge department store. By royal appointment, no less. . . . Herod’s. Why?

Cathy: Well, it’s the gift my Caspar got for the baby. I need to see if I can exchange it.

Margaret: Why, what did he get?

Cathy: Frankincense, would you believe? I mean, it’s a lovely gift and all. But not for a baby. I would have thought one of those pull-along wooden donkeys would be more the thing. These days, kids love their high tech toys, don’t they? What present did your Melchior go for, Margaret?

Margaret: Oh, he just brought along some gold. Well, you never know what to buy for a young couple starting out. With gold, at least they can choose a toy, or maybe some clothes. Perhaps they’ll choose that new thing called swaddling.

Betty: What is swaddling, exactly?

Margaret: Oh, it's the latest big band. All the rage, apparently.

Cathy: Yes, it would be an appropriate gift. But frankincense? I ask you! What are they going to do with frankincense? What about you Betty? What did your Balthazar get?

Betty: Oh ... eh ... just a wee prezzy. Nothing much really. *[Quickly changing the subject]* But as for that big shop Cathy, you can always ask the king in his palace at Jerusalem ... if we ever get there!

Cathy: Oh yes, the king. What do we know about this king anyway?

Margaret: Well! *[In hushed tones, the others gathering round]* I have to say, I always give everyone the benefit of the doubt. But some of the stories I've heard about this Herod. You wouldn't credit half of them.

Betty: *[Excitedly]* Go on, Margaret, do tell!

Margaret: Ten ... wives. *[Nodding]*

Betty and Cathy: *[Aghast]* No!

Margaret: Yes. I know that on account of his first wife, Doris.

Betty: Doris?

Margaret: Yes. Doris. It's true. There was a queen Doris. Anyway, I was at school with her cousin Tracy, and she told me. I can't remember them all. Mariamne, she was one. Then there was a Malthace. And the latest is called Elpis. She's got a daughter called Salome who dances a bit, I hear, and they say she's a bit of a looker. Yes, I can imagine the boys losing their heads over that girl.* But Herod! He's cruel. Oh, he's a cruel, cruel man.

Betty: How is he with children? I always think you can tell a lot about a man from the way he is with children.

Margaret: Ooooooh, I don't get a lot of warmth from him on that score. And he's paranoid about plots to have him bumped off, and people laying claim to his kingdom, and such like.

Cathy: You know ladies, I don't think this "going-to-Jerusalem" business is a very good idea – what with our hubbies planning to ask this old king, about some new king.

Margaret: I tell you Cathy, I think you're right. Our so-called "wise" husbands haven't thought this one through. I think you'd better forego that shopping expedition. Just give the baby that frankincense. But remember to put the receipt in. They can always change it. Does Herod's do a January sale, do we know?

Cathy: Right enough Margaret. Sometimes it's nice just to choose our own presents. And speaking of presents Betty: what did you get for the baby? You never said.

Betty: [*Hesitantly*] No ... I never did, did I?

Margaret: Well come on then. What did you get for the baby king?

Betty: [*Pause*] Myrrh.

Margaret: Myrrhh? ... Myrrh??? ... [*Concerned*] You can't give a baby myrrh, Betty dear, really you can't.

Cathy: I don't even know what myrrh is.

Margaret: Cathy ... [*under her breath*] you anoint dead people with myrrh, [*louder*] or you can use it as a pain killing drug. But not for babies!

Cathy: Pardon me Betty, but I can't help but feel it's going to put a wee bit of a damper on the whole baby shower thing.

Betty: Well I said that to Balthazar. I said: "Balthazar," I said. "I knew I shouldn't have let you do the shopping. What on earth have you gone and got myrrh for? Why myrrh, you silly man? Why?" And (would you credit it?) he just said ... [*in a dim sort of voice*] "I don't really know. I saw it there on the shelf and it just seemed 'right' in a strange sort of way." [*Normal*

voice] Still, what's bought is bought, so we'll just give it to the baby anyway – more in hope than expectation.

Margaret: It's hardly very hopeful dear, is it? I mean, pain killing drugs and a death ointment? It's like sending a turkey a Hogmanay invitation.

Betty: *[Thoughtfully]* Well, I don't know. Balthazar might just have a point. ... Pain and death. ... Pain and death. They're so much part of who we are. We all suffer in life, and we've all got to die, after all.

Margaret: I know dear, but it's not the sort of thing you want to be reminded about.

Betty: But maybe you should be reminded every now and again. And maybe deep down in this whole life and death thing there's still some room for hope: the hope that someday ... somehow ... things will change. I reckon that's what my Balthazar's hoping. And I reckon that's the message of the myrrh too. After all, it's what we hope for all babies: to be bigger than the ordinary things mapped out for them. Wouldn't that be something? To be born a baby, bigger than destiny. ... Bigger than death. What a hope!

Cathy: You know what Betty? In a strange way, that's a beautiful thought. I mean, that is a world-altering thought ... to hope and to believe. *[Pause]* But let me ask you something. If you had bought the present,

would you have gone for myrrh, or maybe some nice swaddling?

Betty: Oh, the swaddling any day! But ... I would still hope.

[Exeunt to quiet Christmas music]

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If you use one sketch or more, have fun, and let us know how your performance goes. Please e-mail us some photographs, if you take any.

All the best! Have a very merry and peaceful Christmas when it comes,

Alec and Robin

Rev Alec Shuttleworth
The Manse
1 Kirkport
Tarbolton
Mauchline
KA5 5QJ
Scotland
revshuttleworth@aol.com

The Rev Dr Robin Hill
The Manse
8A Elcho Road
Longniddry
East Lothian
EH32 0LB
Scotland
robinailsa@btinternet.com

The Church of Scotland HIV Programme
121 George Street
Edinburgh
EH2 4YN
Scotland
hiv@churchofscotland.org.uk

To find out more about the Church of Scotland HIV Programme, visit:
www.churchofscotland.org.uk/appeals/hivaids/index.htm

** In Sketch III, when Margaret speaks about Herod's family, we know she was meaning a different "Salome", but the joke was just too tempting to pass up!*