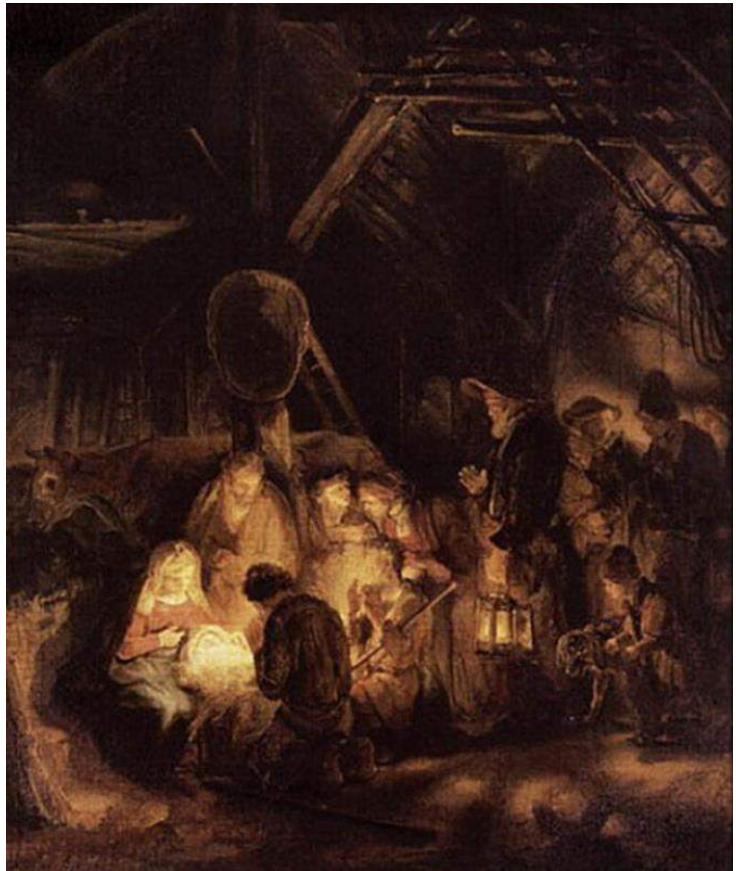


## O Emmanuel

What is it that we are looking at here?

What do we *see*? Take a moment or two to *read* this painting; to notice what it contains, and what it does not; to notice *how* it shows us what it does show us.

It's a painting by the Dutch artist Rembrandt, and some of you will I'm sure be familiar with it. It's called 'The Adoration of the Shepherds', and that alone gives us all the clue we need to decide what we are looking at. It's a nativity scene, set in a 17<sup>th</sup> century rural context – a peasant community in Holland, poor, humble, *ordinary* we might say. And what is occurring here is taking place in a barn, or rather what is left of a barn. Because looking at it again, it seems that this is a barn in a state of decay and in serious need of repair. Those roof timbers in the top right hand corner suggest that, despite the cosy glow, the scene is only partly a sheltered one, remaining open to the elements from above at least.



It's a nativity, and we can see that as soon as we have it confirmed by the title given to it by curators and art-historians. We can see the newborn, his mother and father, and this gathering of farm-workers who are first on the scene. There's even an ox standing in the shadows, no doubt waiting to indulge in a bit of seasonal lowing so as to ensure that the baby awakes on cue.

But while, together with all this visual detail, our minds may already be taking a seriously theological turn, allowing matters immediately post-natal to give way to gigantic claims about what is really happening here, what its true significance is—claims in which words such as God, salvation, and 'taking flesh' probably lie close at hand, let's notice again just how ordinary in some respects this picture is. And, anyone viewing it for the first time and without having read the title and not knowing anything about the story within which we have already located and made sense of it, such a person might well be forgiven for supposing this to depict just another risky birth among many others in times and places far flung from anything resembling a modern maternity unit.

It's a nativity alright. But it's a far cry from the nativities painted for us in earlier centuries, or the warmer, lighter, more colourful (and more Catholic) places on the other side of the Alps and several hundred miles closer to the equator.

It's very different from this, for instance, by the Italian Fra Angelico, painted two hundred years earlier in 1441 on the walls of the Monastery of San Marco in Florence.



Or this by Jan Gossaert, much closer to home geographically (in Belgium), but painted 120 years before Rembrandt applied his brush to canvas, and within a very different religious climate and culture.

In these sorts of depictions, with their abundance of haloes, bands of angels, shards of gold, exotic visitors, and peculiar depictions of the infant himself, even being totally lacking in familiarity with the story of Christmas we would have a hard time supposing them to be illustrations from a first century version of 'Call the Midwife'. Quite clearly, they show us something bizarre, something utterly remarkable, something very much *extra-ordinary*, whatever we may suppose that something to be. There's no way we could ever mistake this as 'just



another birth'. Its exceptional nature is writ large all over it, unless we've been to some very wild and weird parties indeed...

But not Rembrandt. If this is indeed the moment at which the world's history shifts on its axis once and for all; the moment in which the eternal purposes of God, hidden since the foundation of the world, come to a decisive head and enter an unprecedented new and



critical phase; if what is pictured for us here is the moment when God at last shows himself to be not just 'for us' or 'on our side' like some loyal supporter of a perpetually losing and ever further relegated football team, but *for us* to the extent of choosing to be 'with us' by becoming one of us, putting God in a place where God discovered what being human was all about and how it felt from the inside (what one theologian refers to as in all sorts of ways 'the most subversive claim ever made in the history of the human race' to the implications of which familiarity should not be allowed to dull us), if *that* is what is happening here then all we can say is that it is occurring with unsurpassed understatement, barely noticeable if at all, easily mistakable for something utterly and unashamedly ordinary.

So, what is going on? Well, Rembrandt paints this in the town of Leiden in 1636, both a time and a place where religious and political life was in the grip of a particularly fervent and all-encompassing theological vision – that of High Calvinism – a time and a place, we should note, when painters and sculptors and many other practitioners in the arts found themselves in a world suddenly less than well-disposed to their talents and training, when 'images' of one sort or another were objects treated at best with considerable religious suspicion, and treated at worst to proscription, banishment and destruction.

Artists (much of whose custom and employment had once been in and for the churches) were suddenly *personae non gratia*, their long apprenticeship and training as painters of grand religious themes on the one hand and the lurid and dramatic episodes from Greek and Roman mythology on the other suddenly left them without gainful employment, such things now being ruled wholly unsuitable and out of order for the gaze of good Christian citizens. There was to be no more art in churches, since its presence there amounted to idolatry. And the Christian artist, like his or her Christian patrons, should avoid all dalliances with anything prone to encourage superstition or engender false or misleading impressions or beliefs, anything unwarranted by (let alone at odds with) what Scripture plainly tells us. It was acceptable perhaps (though the strictest and most seriously pious probably shuddered

even at this prospect) to have images in one's home or private apartment, even pictures visualizing scenes from biblical stories such as those found in the Old Testament and the Gospels. But – and here was the key thing – *nothing* should be shown but things which the human eye could see. Nothing was to be seen in paintings, that is to say, that might not, in principle and had we been there, have been seen by perfectly *natural* means by those who *were* there. Ordinary human realities, and the good things of God's creation. That was all.

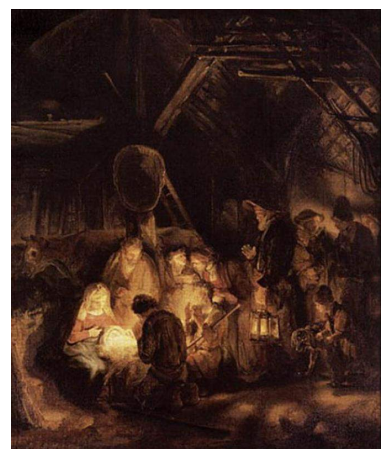
So, there was to be no more truck, for instance, with images of God the Father depicted



familiarly as a bearded old man, brooding over things like some biblical sword of Damocles, often accompanied by the Holy Spirit hovering in the form of a dove, as in this painting of the nativity by the Italian artist Pittoni in the mid-eighteenth century, and following a long and well-established tradition in Catholic art. No more choirs of angels ascending and descending either, or haloes encompassing the heads of those deemed holy enough, or infant Jesuses looking (though not in this particular instance) much more like miniature adults and ostentatiously brandishing, orbs, sceptres, chalices and all manner of other unlikely objects. No more of that!! the religious authorities in Leiden in 1636 insisted. Only what the human eye can (and therefore the eyes of those present we may safely assume *could*) see. Only, we might say, the humanity of Christ, and not his divinity lest any dangerous confusion

between the two be encouraged, visually or in other ways. Only what the eye can see.

Now, all this led to a number of things in the history of painting, and I'll mention just two. First, artists in Holland and elsewhere in northern Europe discovered the importance of diversifying rather than having all your painterly skills and subjects in one religiously vulnerable basket. Robbed of their traditional markets, but obliged still to keep body and soul together and the bank manager contented, they deliberately shifted their attention, developing new skills, new visual interests and new markets. And it is this that we have to thank for the explosion of landscape paintings, still life painting, portraiture, and so called 'genre painting' – paintings of scenes from everyday life, of ordinary people doing ordinary things, at work or in recreation, of familiar objects found in every home, and so



on. Painting, we could say, not just *only* what the eye can see, but *whatever* the eye can see; and celebrating the rich visual feast of the world and life in the world.

Secondly, though, artists developed a new visual language, ways of encoding things so that the depiction of visible realities might come to 'show' that which was *not* visible, trespassing beyond the constraints of religious imposition, and keeping the supra-natural, the unseen and unseeable world lying beyond or beneath the surface appearances if things fully in play and, ironically, fully in sight for anyone with eyes to see!

On the face of it, it would be easy enough to mistake this painting by Rembrandt as a genre painting (it could easily have been marketed as one), a scene from everyday peasant life and nothing more. Even those identifying it as a familiar religious motif, a 'nativity', might reasonably insist that it is one stripped back in accordance with the rules, lacking the sort of



in-your-face, bold theological gestures of the Fra Angelico, or the Jan Gossaert, or the Giovanni Pittoni ('Nothing to see here! Nothing here for the official image police to get excited about!'). Another look, though, may persuade us to go back and spend more time with this painting, to see whether there is more yet to be seen, more to be glimpsed beyond and through its surfaces.

The Light of the World, says John in the first chapter of his Gospel, came into the world. The true light, which lightens everyone, was coming into the world. This light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. As so often in Rembrandt's painting, it is

precisely the play of light and darkness that is at the heart of this one.

At its centre and illuminating the key players is a cosy pool of light, light provided, we are no doubt intended to suppose, courtesy of the shepherd's large lantern by the light of which, presumably, he and his colleagues have found their way through the darkness to be here. But look again. Look more closely. And you begin to see that the light cannot possibly be coming from that lantern. It can't possibly be – because the shadows that fall on the floor are all wrong (there's nothing getting in the way to *make* those shadows if that is where the light is coming from); and the lantern can hardly be lighting up the face of the shepherd who holds it at knee-level. No, the light is



coming from somewhere else, and its source is much brighter than the lantern.



And look at the hand of the shepherd who kneels closest to the crib. It is translucent, glowing with a light which is shining *through* it.

Which means of course that the source of the light in this picture,

extraordinarily, is the crib itself, and the newborn infant contained in it. Rembrandt toys with us in the way he presents seemingly quite natural phenomena, breaking their rules, rendering them ambiguous, impossible even, so as to suggest, to 'show' us the presence of the exceptional, the unique, the un-seeable. What we are invited to see is the reality of the one who is the Light of the World coming into the world and coming into its darkness, unimaginably, by becoming and being something which is and was, on one level, perfectly ordinary. A baby, a toddler, a boy, and a man – a human life lived in the midst of our human lives. So, this painting has plenty of theology in it; it says 'incarnation', 'God with us', "veiled in flesh, the Godhead see...!". And it does so perfectly well without resort to haloes, angels or orbs and sceptres.

But let's look again at the whole picture. And let's remind ourselves again as we do so of those paintings with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit thrust into impossible visibility.

We've seen the Pittoni already. Here's another by Paolo Veronese from the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And one from just across the Alps in southern Germany, and from the beginning of that century, by Albrecht Dürer. Look long and hard at them.



Now, back to Rembrandt, who shows us only human realities - people, and the things of human agricultural life. But look at that gleanings basket hanging on the beam above Joseph's head, and perhaps you might see its shadowy form as itself evocative of a head, a giant head brooding mysteriously in the shadows over the scene below, the timbers of the barn stretching



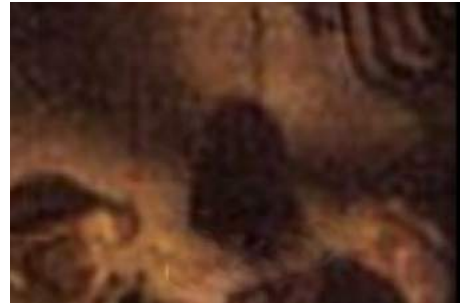
out on either side of it for all the world like giant arms, sheltering or embracing or holding what happens here. Is this fanciful? Perhaps. And perhaps not. Perhaps, again, Rembrandt is gesturing towards or alluding to a visual tradition which he may not show directly, and to a divine reality which he takes to be invisibly present.

In fact, if we remind ourselves that where the Father is the Holy Spirit is too, we might even



be bold enough as to ask whether, on the right-hand side of the painting, there is an allusion to the hovering dove of such earlier depictions. Of course, it's just a hat and a shadow cast on the barn wall isn't it? Or is it? A bit of

airbrushing to lose the human face beneath the hat perhaps heightens the visual likeness, however imprecise, to those depictions of a bird hovering, its wings outstretched, over the scene. Did Rembrandt intend it to? Did he want, heavily encoded, to show us not just the incarnation of the Son, but its larger trinitarian setting, in the Son's relationship to the Father and



the Spirit, too? His picture is entitled 'The Adoration of the Shepherds'. Interestingly, the one by Dürer is called 'The Adoration of the Holy Trinity'. Maybe what Rembrandt reminds us in this painting is that both 'adorations' need to be borne in mind if we are really to grasp the significance of what is occurring here. The reality of heaven and earth intersect here without either being compromised. The life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is played out here not in the clouds, suspended in mid-air as though concerned to get no closer to our world than is absolutely necessary, but in the thick of that world - in, with and under its creaturely realities, coming to be 'God with us' and drawing our world in to share in that same life.



We don't know exactly what Rembrandt intended, of course. But what seems certain enough is that this painting presents not an attenuated nativity from which mystery and meaning have been stripped out, but a thoroughly human birth in which, nonetheless, from top to bottom, there is altogether more going on than ever meets the eye.



