O Magnum Mysterium, et admirable sacramentum; ut animalia viderent Dominum natum, iacentem in praesepio – O great and wonderful mystery, that the animals see the Lord, newly-born, and lying in a manger.

Words from the Office of Matins for Christmas, originally a responsorial chant, these words have been set to music by many great composers, many beautiful settings from Byrd and Palestrina, to Poulenc and Morten Lauridsen. My favourite setting of them is by the young Norwegian composer Ola Gjeilo.

That the animals should see the Lord – yes, we can assume that there were animals at the birth of Christ, because he was born in an animal shelter, and his makeshift crib was a manger. In the gospel story, the animals are not mentioned, St Luke alone mentions the manger, their feeding trough.

So in our crib, our representation of this animal shelter in which God became man, humbling himself for our sake, we have our animals. We have the ox and the ass. The ox, a bit like a cow or a bull, and the ass, a donkey. There was a church in America in the news recently that had real animals in its outdoor nativity scene, but the cow kept escaping and the police had to round it up. No danger of that with our crib – but real or made with plaster makes no difference to the theological significance – they are there to teach us something. Why these two? Because these animals are mentioned in Isaiah's prophecy "I have reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner and the donkey it's master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand".(Is 1.2-3) So the ox and the ass have become part of the scene – many great artists have included them in their paintings. They are there in so many of our Christmas carols as well. "Ox and ass before him bow, for he is in the manger now. Christ is born today."

As always, with the mysteries of our faith, nothing is there by chance, and everything has a meaning – and we are meant to learn something, even from these animals – it was the Church father Origen in the third century, who linked the Isaiah prophecy with the birth of Christ. He says that the ox, a clean animal in the eyes of the Jews, represents God's chosen people, whereas the ass, or the donkey, being a ritually unclean animal, represents the gentiles. But both are united in their worship of the Messiah, the Son of God – whereas the people, who ought to have known better, have no understanding.

So there is a great irony here in Isaiah's prophecy, which is just as pertinent today. The animals worship, whereas the people do not. The animals are docile, the people are rebellious.

What other animals were there? The lamb, possibly, brought along by the shepherds, to foreshadow his paschal sacrifice, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. The lamb reminds us of our sins, of our waywardness which makes us stray from God, and how much we need Jesus to be our shepherd. The ass also points us to Holy Week and Palm Sunday - Jesus our King rides into the city on a donkey, to suffer and die for our sake, fulfilling what the prophet Zephaniah wrote "Rejoice, greatly, O Jerusalem, for behold your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey."

So we can learn something from the ox the ass, and the lamb; dumb, silly and stubborn animals though they are. They are there in that crib scene, by design of the Lord, to teach us, if we are willing to learn, if we are willing to listen. If we will not, then they are wiser than we are, so let us allow them to challenge us – look into their faces in that crib, and let them ask you a question:

Will you submit yourself to the Lord, will you follow him and worship him? Will you let him be your King and Shepherd, leader and guide? Not just today, but every day, every week.

Origen concludes his reflection on the crib like this : "Having understood this manger, let us strive to know the Lord, and become worthy of the knowledge of Him, and to receive His birth, the resurrection of His flesh, and also His glorious return in majesty; to Him be glory and dominion unto all ages. Amen."