

ADVENT FULFILLED

Luke 2:1-20

Galatians 4:4-7

Do you ever feel like Charlie Brown and wonder what Christmas is all about? We can so easily get caught up in the round of buying presents, baking cakes, putting up decorations, entertaining family and friends that we forget that Christmas is really all about the birth of Jesus – which we celebrate tonight.

Let's try and refocus on the real meaning of Christmas tonight and throughout the remainder of this season.

Now I know that most of us have read the story of the birth of Jesus from chapter 2 of Luke's gospel – our gospel reading for tonight – many times, but let's look at it again together and try and discover something new together. So please open your Bibles at page [***] so that you can follow this with me as we study it together.

In chapter 1 of his gospel Luke tells us how the birth of Jesus was foretold. In our reading today from chapter 2 Luke tells of the actual birth of Jesus. He starts by explaining how it was that Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem and the manner of his birth – look at verses 1-5: “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.” (Luke 2:1-5 NIV).

On the surface it seems that Jesus being born in the town of Bethlehem resulted from the might of the Roman Empire commanding a census, but in reality this was used by God to serve His purposes and fulfilled the scriptural prophecy of the place of

Jesus' birth contained in Micah 5:2. The power of Rome was made to serve a much greater sovereign.

Given the fact that Jesus was to end his life on the cross, it's interesting that he was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is a small town about 9 Kms Southwest of Jerusalem near the highway between Shechem and Hebron and was the source of many of the lambs used for temple sacrifice in Jerusalem. Now it was the birthplace of Jesus – our sacrificial lamb.

Jesus' destiny was to be rejected by the Jewish establishment and eventually to be crucified at their insistence. We've already seen how Jesus' crucifixion is prefigured in his birthplace, but his rejection is also prefigured in the circumstances of his birth – He was placed in a manger because there was no room for them at the Inn – look at verses 6 and 7:

“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:6-7 NIV)

There was no room for Jesus in the Inn and many of us still won't make room for him in our hearts today. In fact the so-called “Inn” would have been nothing like a modern Inn – Bethlehem was much too small to have supported a commercial Inn and in any event the Greek word used here ‘kataluma’ doesn't really carry that meaning. The establishment would either have been a ‘caravanserei’ or large room in which travellers bedded down together, or the word could mean the guest room of a private family. In any event there was insufficient space in that room and so Jesus was born in a stable or cave for animals – again pointing to his destiny as our sacrificial lamb.

There are lots of interesting parallels between the birth of Jesus and the birth of John the Baptist described by Luke in chapter 1 of his gospel and you might want to look at that for yourselves during this Christmas season.

This theme of Jesus not really being socially acceptable is continued in verses 8-10 where the Lord chooses to bring the good news of Jesus' birth to a group of shepherds.

Now, in those times shepherds were regarded as not being socially acceptable. The Mishnah – which are the Jewish oral traditions – tells us shepherds were held to be thieves and just one step above lepers. Don't you think its strange that they were chosen to be witnesses of an important event like this, because in those days their testimony was thought to be totally unreliable and was not acceptable in court. But God wanted to make it clear that Jesus was and is for everyone. God didn't send news of Jesus' birth to Caesar Augustus or governor Quirinius but to practically the lowest level of society – a group of shepherds. With the birth of Jesus the powerful are brought down and the lowly are lifted up. As Luke says in chapter 1 “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble”. Caesar Augustus may have thought he was divine, indeed the name Augustus means ‘holy’ or ‘revered’ and he initiated the cult which revered Roman Caesars as gods. He called himself the Son of God – but all these attributes and titles really belonged to Jesus.

Jesus was given exalted titles, look at verse 11:

“Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:11 NIV)

It wasn't yet clear what these titles might mean or how the roles they refer to would be realised, but the honour and praise given to Jesus by Angels in verses 13 and 14 and by the Shepherds in verse 20 was an appropriate response to the birth of the Messiah – the advent of God into the world as our saviour and Lord.

In this verse Luke grounds his description of Christ in the context of the prophecy of Isaiah in Isaiah 9:1-7 and the prior material about the throne of David in chapter 1 of Luke's gospel. Luke is showing the importance of Jesus in historical terms – the fulfilment of Israel's hopes for divine deliverance by a Messiah and Saviour. Caesar Augustus was also known as saviour and lord, but Luke is making it

clear that Jesus is the “real” Saviour and by associating the term Lord with Christ or Messiah he is showing what kind of Lord Jesus will be and contrasting this with Roman lordship. Our reading from Galatians made it clear that Jesus was to be our saviour and redeemer.

The idea of “peace on earth” is introduced in verse 14:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.” (Luke 2:14 NIV)

Here, “peace on earth” meshes with the Jewish concept of ‘Shalom’ – which means peace with justice and healing. It is clear that this ‘Shalom’ is for the whole world, not just for Israel. In the birth of Jesus, God’s mercy has fallen on the whole world.

Our shepherds now visit the baby Jesus – see verses 15 and 16:

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”” (Luke 2:15 NIV)

Having seen for themselves they proceed to spread the good news abroad – look at verse 17:

“When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,” (Luke 2:17 NIV)

Thus, these lowly shepherds become the first evangelists, spreading the good news of Jesus. Let that be an example to us all this Christmas. We don’t need to be gifted speakers, brilliant theologians or anointed evangelists – if uneducated shepherds can spread the good news about Jesus, so can we. The gospel has already told us all we need to know, but how will we respond? It’s not enough just to look into the manger and say “how nice, Christmas gives me such warm feelings”. No, we need to accept Jesus into our hearts and share the good news about him with others.

The shepherds evangelism was obviously effective – look at verse 18:

“and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” (Luke 2:18 NIV)

Mary's response in verse 19 was also appropriate:

“But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19 NIV)

She reflected or ‘pondered’ over what had happened and wondered what it all meant. We still need to actively think seriously and deeply, to ponder, about what the incarnation of Jesus - which is his becoming flesh and blood - means today. Clearly it ties in with his becoming our sacrificial lamb as Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah chapter 53 and when we symbolically partake of his body and flesh around his table tonight we celebrate his giving up his life for us as our sacrificial lamb.

So let's be like the shepherds and make our way to Jesus, celebrate the good news and then go out and joyfully share the good news of His birth and his sacrifice for us and what that means for our world this Christmas and throughout the New Year.

So let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father I pray that this Christmastime you will give us all a real heart for Jesus as our Lord and saviour – the God/man whose advent some 2,000 years ago was a real historical breaking into our world – and motivate and empower us to carry the good news to our family, friends and neighbours. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.