

Reading: Luke 2:1-20

Theme: Events around the Nativity.

Last week we saw something of Mary's life and its dramatic changes through God's work in her. Dr Luke gives us many details about the advent story and it covers a period of some 15 months from Gabriel appearing to Zachariah, then later to Mary; Mary's visit to Elizabeth and their wonderful outbursts of praise; the birth of John and Zachariah's prophetic song - all are glorious things, but in the verses we read in Chapter 2 we are at the heart of the Christmas story - the newborn baby Jesus, angels singing and shepherds visiting. I want to go simply and quickly through these verses to see matters we can apply to our own lives from what we learn from these verses.

1. The Poll-Tax. (v1-3)

I'm using the term poll-tax because it is the best description of it. There was a census and at the same time they registered, they were taxed! Dr Luke listed political figures for Theophilus (1:3) - the original recipient of this gospel. It means little to us except a difficult word to pronounce, but it enabled him to accurately date the birth of Jesus. Theophilus would be able to verify the true historical nature of the writings of Dr Luke. I don't want to go into the historical details, but should you want to, I recommend Hendrickson on Luke and his excellent comments on Caesar Augustus and Quirinius.

What we need to understand is that God moved the whole world in His providence and used such a poll-tax to bring about the fulfilment of His word - that the Saviour would be born in Bethlehem. Man proposes, but God disposes. God's hand has to be seen in these events. We also need eyes of faith to see God's hand in our lives as He works in them in His providence -

whether personally or related to our national situations. We cannot always understand God's providences, but we can rest assured He knows exactly what and why He does things. Here the poll tax was used and now we see:

2. The Journey. (v4-5)

Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem from Nazareth to register in this poll-tax census. Both of them were of David's line and so they went down to Bethlehem. This would have been quite a journey, not so much for Joseph, but certainly for Mary as she was coming towards the last days of her pregnancy. It would have been a journey of about 80 to 90 miles (*possibly on a donkey for Mary*). It is interesting to note Luke does not call Mary Joseph's wife, but "betrothed" or "pledged to be married to". Matthew tells us they were married by this time, but because they had no sexual union at this point, they are termed betrothed, pledged to be married by Dr Luke.

The journey was an necessary journey, if it had not been so, from what we know of Joseph we doubt he would have made his wife make such journey at such a late stage of pregnancy, especially with such a child as he had been told of by the angel and also by Mary herself after the dream he had. In our lives the Lord may take us out of our way, or our lives can be turned upside down and inside out, but He does so because He knows what He wants to accomplish in and through our lives, in situations where we would not want to be in of our own choice. Yet as then with Mary and Joseph, so now in our lives, the Lord knows what He's doing and is with us.

3. The Birth. (v6-7)

The birth of God in a real body - we use the term ‘God incarnate’ which means that God the Son was forever joined together with a real body like ours – two natures but one person. Yet the actual birth is simply described - the time came for her baby to be born and Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Note the emphasis at the start of v6 “*While they were there...*” Mary’s time to give birth had come. We have noted the conception was a miraculous, supernatural conception, but the development of the baby in her womb, overseen by the Holy Spirit, was natural and according to the laws of nature which God Himself had put in place. The birth also was natural - with all its dangers and pain, its sorrows and joys. Jesus was born of a woman and He was not transported down Star Trek style, but was bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh and entered the world as we did. It’s interesting to note He is described as “*her firstborn son*” - not as her only son as others teach! In other parts of the NT we have mention of Jesus’ brothers and sisters and they are even named (Matthew 13:55-56).

We know that even though He was the Son of God, Son of the most high, He was not born in a palace or to royalty, but in an obscure little backwater town, in an inn, not even an inn as there was no room there, but in a stable and He was laid in an animals feeding basket, trough – a manger. He was wrapped in cloths - swaddling cloths, strips of cloth wound around the baby. Some say the original word has reference to torn and worn cloths - rags!

To all intents and purposes this nativity scene is a scene of sadness - a peasant family, uprooted, even with the wife in a heavily pregnant state, they have to travel, have to sleep in a stable area of an inn and she had to give birth in unhygienic

conditions. With her being young woman, a teenager and it possibly being Joseph's first attendance at the birth, then we are almost at the edge of a tragedy! Even then, the poor baby was dressed in torn rags, swaddling cloths and laid in an animal's feeding basket, trough.

If that is all it was, it would rank with many other such situations as a sad picture. Yet the scene is transformed when we realise the child was no ordinary child. The world around couldn't see it, yet Mary and Joseph knew He wasn't an ordinary child, and how much they must have longed for others to share in their joy and excitement at the birth of this One. Amazingly others knew of the wonder of God incarnate, of Jesus' birth and knew it from a far higher viewpoint than Mary and Joseph! These ones were going to be the amazed announcers and bringers of the news and would let others know the great and glorious good news of the Saviour. Let's see the ones who were told first:

4. The Shepherds. (v8)

These were the first ones to be told the good news of Jesus as they watched over their flocks at night. It's a simple and lovely description of these men and their work. There's nothing complicated about this part of their role. We may not realise shepherds were a despised class of society, considered by their generation as many consider travelling folk, gypsies today? Their work made it difficult for them to keep many Mosaic laws and especially the many man-made laws superimposed on the Law of Moses. They were treated with distrust concerning their misplacing of other people's property! They were generally regarded as unreliable and not allowed to give evidence in court.

These ones were considered as nobodies in society, but to these ones, the awesome news of this seemingly humble birth is brought first of all. When society then and now might say “*Why get so excited about such a birth?*” These humble men were given news and understood it was no ordinary child. To these ones, while at work, the great news is brought of the Saviour’s birth.

The great good news of the Saviour, which is what the gospel tells, is not restricted to one or other class or part of society. It is necessary for all people and is freely available to all people - members of royalty, parliament, government and local councils all need to hear of this Saviour, as do those who have or do not have great wealth, education, possessions or standing in society. The Saviour is needed by all of us and we must make sure we have Him as our own Saviour. It’s not that we need to be religious, but to have the reality of the good news of this Saviour being our own Saviour. The good news of the Saviour first came to the shepherds and was brought by:

5. The Angels. (v9-14)

Suddenly, instantly and without warning an angel of the Lord appeared to these rugged men and they were terrified! Yet even though the angel terrified them, the message the angel brought was of good news, of the Saviour born in Bethlehem. The shepherds, like the rest of the world, were totally unaware of the great event of the birth of Jesus.

Incredibly the angels had watched in wonder and amazement as God the Son had taken to Himself human nature, been united with and contained in a cell, an embryo, foetus and now was born. It was an amazing thing. They may have known that the

salvation of men and women would require this, yet for them it was glorious in their estimation. This royal messenger came in his dazzling glory and announced the fact to the shepherds there that night on the hills around Bethlehem. They heard the good news, but there was more, an even more glorious scene – for the glory multiplied as the heavenly army appeared and brought great words of praise and glory to God in the highest.

As I have re-read this incident, I am just thrilled that our God is so gentle and considerate. The one angel appeared, calmed, removed their fears and announced the good news. Then, when they became used to the celestial brilliance of the one heavenly messenger, then, and only then, does the Lord allow the entire host to appear! Artists have tried to capture this on canvas, with limited success. Can we imagine what a glorious scene, what a thunder of heavenly voices must have been heard as the host of heaven burst forth in praise to God for the Saviour who had been born in Bethlehem.

This underlines it was no ordinary baby born in obscurity. This One was heaven's darling, the One who had left the throne of heaven to be contracted to a pinhead, to a baby and the angels were going to let it be known that He did so to be the Saviour of all will trust in Him. Will we trust Him? Moving on we see:

6. The Seeking and Finding. (v15-18)

The shepherds were not just pleased and thrilled to hear this news, nor say that was a great thing to hear about, but they were **determined** to go and see this One. They couldn't just hop in a Land Rover or on a quad bike and head off down into Bethlehem for a quick visit; it involved effort and a considerable time for them. Yet off they went. They were not going to look after sheep

now, for they were determined to go and seek for the Saviour they'd been told of – seek for the One who was the Good Shepherd!

Perhaps someone here has heard often of Jesus, then can I encourage you to be like the shepherds and seek Him and keep on until, like them, you find Him for yourself. I urge you, especially if God has put within you a desire, an interest to find Jesus and the truth concerning Him, then do not let anything put you off. The shepherds searched and may have found new baby after new baby, but they searched until they found the one in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. I suspect Mary and Joseph must have had a shock as the shepherds came in and then they worshipped baby Jesus. Probably Mary and Joseph were more shocked when the shepherds told them of the angels and all that had been sung and said up in the hills that night!

Later we know others were told of Jesus and were amazed at what the shepherds told them, but we are not told they went to seek out the Saviour for themselves. The danger is that we too can be like that - we can hear, be amazed and touched by the wonder of Christmas, but we are not seeking the Saviour for ourselves. The shepherds did, they found Him, rejoiced and worshipped Him. Are we prepared to seek for Him and find Him - not just as the Saviour of the world, but as our own Saviour? Finally, we see:

7. The Treasuring and Praising. (v19-20)

The contrast between Mary and the shepherds it is quite dramatic. The shepherds noisily and excitedly tell the news to others, then go back to their jobs and did so praising God. Yet Mary, in her own way praises God, but she expresses it in her

quiet contemplation and takes to heart all the details, all the things she been told and had seen. She stored them in the treasure chest of her heart and many years later that was opened up for Dr Luke and he was able to record such things for ones like us today and for the past 2000 years or so. I'm so glad Mary was a treasure keeper of these things!

In our lives there are times when things must be hoarded and treasured up in our hearts and pondered over. At other times we will need to be those who openly glorify and praise God - especially for God's word fulfilled in our own lives. I would urge us all to ponder the good news, the gospel message, even this thrilling message of Christmas which tells us of the Saviour who came to save His people from their sins. As we do so, we will find this to be true, then we will know the great reason to glorify and praise God at Christmas - and all year through. My prayer and longing are that we all - both young and old, would know this Saviour as our own Saviour and we would go on to live lives to glorify and praise God and we will then find His word constantly being fulfilled in our own lives and experience.

God willing, next week we will look at and contrast in more detail the angels and shepherds.