

## **“O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM”**

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## **Scripture Reading – Luke, 2:1-7**

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*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. 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.*

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***“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”***

***‘Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.’***

**Micah, 5:2-5a, NIV**

**This Advent series is based on the Christmas carol: ‘O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM’.**

I imagine that for some of you this is a much-loved Christmas carol. I would like us to think of this season of Advent in terms of this theme. A carol is a joyful religious song or hymn.

### **Why do we have joy to offer to the world?**

I like the way **G K Chesterton** answers this question in his book ‘**ORTHODOXY**’. He writes, ‘THE MASS OF PEOPLE HAVE BEEN FORCED TO BE HAPPY ABOUT LITTLE THINGS, BUT SAD ABOUT BIG THINGS’. He goes on to say that people have been born upside down and when they receive Christ, they are turned right side up. He writes that when they are stood right side up they realise that by its creed, joy becomes gigantic and sadness something special and small.

*I hope that for you, Advent will allow your joy to become gigantic; and even though you may be sad about little things, you will be joyful about the big things and know which is which...*

## **“O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM”**

**‘O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM’ was written by Phillips Brooks.**

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Phillips Brooks was born in Massachusetts on 13 December 1835. After his ordination at the age of 24, he began his ministry at the Church of the Advent, and three years later became rector of Holy Trinity Church, both in Philadelphia. The carol was written for the Holy Trinity Sunday School in 1868. For 22 years, he was rector of the Trinity Church in Boston, and served there until 1891 when he was consecrated Bishop of Massachusetts.

Phillips Brooks visited Bethlehem in December 1865. Originally there were five verses, but when the hymn was included in ‘THE CHURCH PORCH’, a Hymnal for Sunday Schools, 1874, the fourth verse of the original, ‘Where children pure and happy’, was omitted.

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

*O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth,  
And praises sing to God, the King, and peace to men on earth.  
For Christ is born of Mary; and, gathered all above,  
While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.*

*How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his Heaven.  
No ear may hear his coming; but in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.*

*Where children pure and happy pray to the blessed Child,  
Where misery cries out to thee, Son of the mother mild;  
Where charity stands watching and faith holds wide the door,  
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once more.*

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel.*

## **“O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM”**

**‘BETHLEHEM’ means ‘HOUSE OF BREAD’, the ideal birthplace for ‘THE BREAD OF LIFE’.**

The city is situated five miles south of Jerusalem, overlooking a main highway to Hebron and Egypt. A steep valley drops from the south side of Bethlehem’s rocky spine all the way down to the Dead Sea. Bethlehem’s rich historic heritage includes the death of Rachel, the birth of Benjamin, the marriage of Ruth, and the exploits of David.

**Bethlehem was a walled town, as early as David’s time.**

Many of its narrow streets, lined with substantially built, cubical, flat-roofed stone houses, reveal how the prosperous settlement once was. Today, Bethlehem has a population of over twenty thousand, the majority of which are Arab Christians.

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*  
**Phillips Brooks, SASB 86:1**

## 1. BETHLEHEM: A TOWN OF PROPHECY

***“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”***

**Micah, 5:2, NIV**

**Caesar Augustus was ruling, but God was in charge.**

The Almighty used Caesar's edict to move Mary and Joseph the eighty miles from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to fulfil God's Word. Rome routinely took a census every fourteen years, for both military and tax purposes. Every Jewish male had no option other than to return to the city of his fathers to record his name, occupation, property, and family.

**Critics question whether every man would have to go to his own city to be counted.**

However, an actual Roman government edict found in Egypt reads: *‘Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt orders: “Seeing that the time has come for the house-to-house census, it is necessary to compel all those who for any cause whatsoever are residing outside their districts to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census, and may also diligently attend to the cultivation of their allotments.”’*

**Mary said, “MAY IT BE TO ME AS YOU HAVE SAID” (see Luke, 1:38).**

This meant that from then on, her life would be a part of the fulfilment of divine prophecy. God had promised that the Saviour would be human – not an angel; and a Jew – not a Gentile. He would be from the tribe of Judah, the family of David, born of a virgin in Bethlehem.

**This occurred just as Scriptures said, and Caesar unknowingly played an important part.**  
**AT Pierson** used to say, ‘HISTORY IS HIS STORY’, and the USA President **James A Garfield**, called history ‘THE UNROLLED SCROLL OF PROPHECY’. If God's Word controls our lives, then the events of history can only help us fulfil the will of God.

***“The LORD said to me, “You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled”.”***

**Jeremiah, 1:12, NIV**

*‘A farmer had some pups for sale, so he made a sign and nailed it to his fence. A while later, he felt a tug on his trouser leg. Looking down, he saw the toothless grin of a little boy who was holding out his hand and saying, “Mister, I want to buy one of your puppies”. The farmer, joking, said, “Well, son, these puppies come from mighty fine parents and they cost a good deal”. The boy dropped his head for a moment, then looked back up hopefully and*

*said, “I have thirty-nine cents, would that be enough to take a look?” “Sure”, said the farmer. He whistled and called, “Dolly! Come here dolly!” Out of the doghouse and down the ramp trotted Dolly followed by four little bundles of barking fur. Then, from out of the doghouse peeped another little face, clearly the runt of the litter. This little fellow slid down the ramp and began hobbling in an awkward attempt to catch up with the others. “That's the one I want”, said the beaming little boy. “Son”, said the farmer, “you don't want that puppy. He'll never be able to run and play with you as you'd like”. But there was no changing the boy's mind and taking his money, the farmer said he could pick up the pup in a few more days. When he went to take the pup home, the farmer asked, “Son, why in the world would you choose that runt?” The boy pulled up his own trouser leg and revealed a leg brace. He said, “Well, mister, I don't run too good myself, and he'll need someone who understands”.’*

**Many other cities towered in importance over Bethlehem.**

There was JERUSALEM, there was ROME, and there was ALEXANDRIA. Nonetheless, God chose BETHLEHEM with, and in spite of, her weakness.

**Why did he do that? Why does God choose as he does?**

***“The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”***

**Deuteronomy, 7:7-8, NIV**

God surprisingly chose Gideon, who protested, **“BUT LORD, HOW CAN I SAVE ISRAEL? MY CLAN IS THE WEAKEST IN MANASSEH, AND I AM THE LEAST IN MY FAMILY”** (see **Judges, 6:15**).

God sent Samuel to anoint a son of Jesse to replace Saul as king. Looking at the first Samuel decided, this must be the one, but God said “NO”. After seeing seven sons of Jesse, God still refused them, **“DO NOT CONSIDER HIS APPEARANCE OR HIS HEIGHT, FOR I HAVE REJECTED HIM. THE LORD DOES NOT LOOK AT THE THINGS MAN LOOKS AT. MAN LOOKS AT THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE, BUT THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART”** (see **1 Samuel, 16:7**). Samuel asked if there was another son and Jesse brought in his youngest, David. God said, **“THIS IS THE ONE”**.

***“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him.”***

**1 Corinthians, 1:26-29, NIV**

**So what does this mean for you and me today?**

Surely, it reminds us that God uses the overlooked and neglected... It assures us that the weak and insignificant have a role in God's eternal scheme, and that his strength is perfected in our weakness... It tells us that it does not depend upon what we have, or are, or can do.

## 2. BETHLEHEM: A TOWN OF PROMISE

*'Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.'*

**Micah, 5:3, NIV**

Nearly eight-hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah declared:

*'The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.'*

**Isaiah, 7:14, NIV**

Matthew quotes this verse (in 1:23) as he shows its fulfilment in Jesus.

Jesus would be called 'IMMANUEL' – which means 'GOD IS WITH US' – as predicted by Isaiah the prophet. Jesus was God in the flesh; thus, God was literally among us, 'WITH US'. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ is present today in the life of every believer. Perhaps not even Isaiah understood how far-reaching the meaning of 'IMMANUEL' would be.

*'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.'*

**Isaiah, 9:6-7, NIV**

From promise to fulfilment was a long wait.

Micah likened that time to a woman's pregnancy, and finally to her birth travail. As she waits, so Bethlehem and Israel and the world had to wait. The waiting game is hard to play. We are impatient, we want what we want when we want it, and are an instant society that hates to wait. We want fast food, fast cars, fast computers and microwave cooking. But, God acts in his own time. Delay is not denial. Postponement is not prevention. Our wait is not forever.

*'When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.'*

**Galatians, 4:4-5, NIV**

### YET IN THY DARK STREETS SHINETH THE EVERLASTING LIGHT

*'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.'*

**Isaiah, 9:2, NIV**

### THE HOPES AND FEARS OF ALL THE YEARS ARE MET IN THEE TONIGHT

*'He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.'*

**Micah, 5:4-5a, NIV**

Micah lists four wonderful qualities – not of Bethlehem, but Jesus...

### HE IS ETERNAL

Jesus had no beginning and will have no end. He was not created as were the angels, but is the Creator. He entered into time and space through the womb of the Virgin Mary. He was himself from everlasting equal to and identical to God the Father.

### HE IS SHEPHERD

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep, and then took it up again at his resurrection.

### HE IS MAJESTY

Jesus is great to all the ends of the earth. He is not just Lord, but universal Sovereign.

### HE IS PEACE

Jesus gives peace, not as the world gives, but peace with God, and the peace of God within our hearts. He gives us a peace that passes all understanding. A perfect peace.

Jesus is King of kings, Lord of lords, Mighty God, Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace, Everlasting Father, the Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God, the Rock of Ages, the Ancient of Days, the Light of the World, the image of the invisible God, the exact representation of his likeness. He is the one upon whom God bestowed the Name above all names, the Name before which every knee will bow, and which every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord.

**The little boy thought his pup was wonderful.**

He chose that particular pup because he saw something of himself in the pup – and more than that, he thought the runt of the litter would need someone who understood his weaknesses.

Our Lord Jesus understands us.

*'Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.'*

**Hebrews, 2:18, NIV**

*'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.'*

**Hebrews, 4:15-16, NIV**

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!*

**"O COME TO US, ABIDE WITH US, OUR LORD IMMANUEL"**