"O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM"

"The Wondrous Gift Is Given"

Scripture Reading - Matthew, 2:1-11

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him".

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea", they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel'".

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him".

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.'

II Corinthians, 9:15, 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.

"THE WONDROUS GIFT IS GIVEN"

C:\ My Documents\Word\Ministry\David Ellison\ Festivals\Advent\O Little Town Of Bethlehem\03 The Wondrous Gift is Given

Today, we consider the third verse of Phillips Brooks Christmas Carol...

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.

Christmas is traditionally a time for giving... and a time for shopping.

Ever since the magi arrived carrying gold, incense, and myrrh, people have been exchanging gifts at Christmas. Of course, it seems much more complicated today than it was for the wise men. For one thing, they did not have to contend with shopping centres, packed full of people going from store to store, desperately searching for a Nintendo Wii. The magi did not have to worry about sizes, or colours, or return policies. There were no PSP's or scooters in those days, and definitely no robot dinosaurs. Just plain old gold, incense and myrrh.

Millions of people, both children and adults, will open unwanted gifts at Christmas.

But there is one gift that meets everyone's need; one gift that will never wear out, never break, or need repairing. A gift that is appropriate for a small child, or a teenager, or an adult, or an older adult. Boy or girl, man or woman, it makes no difference. The gift we all need, the most valuable gift of all, is that Baby in the manger. The One that this whole season is about. At Christmas, we celebrate the fact that God gave us the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, so that through faith in him, our sins can be forgiven and we can have eternal life in heaven.

1. THE WONDROUS GIFT IS GIVEN

'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.'

II Corinthians, 9:15, NIV

$\hbox{{\it '}GOOD MORNING, AMERICA' featured some gift ideas that might be called {\it '}INDESCRIBABLE'}.$

They were extraordinary gifts that you might want to include on your Christmas gift list. One of them is the Jaguar 220. If you want to order one, you simply go to your local Jaguar dealer and put down a \$80,000 deposit. When the automobile is delivered you simply pay the balance of \$507,000. The Jaguar 220 costs \$587,000, and they only make 250 of them a year. If you were to purchase one, you might also be interested in a new car wax that promises to give it the ultimate shine. It retails for \$3,400 for a small can. I guess that if you can afford a \$587,000 automobile, you can surely spend \$3,400 for car wax!

Other items mentioned were a \$300,000 gold and silver toilet seat inlaid with precious stones. Of course, there were cheaper gifts for those who already have everything: an \$18,000 frizbee, a \$10,000 yoyo, a \$12,000 mousetrap, a \$27,000 pair of sunglasses, and for the proud grandparent who is wondering what to buy a new baby, how about a dummy for \$28,000?

Gifts like these stagger our imaginations, but they are not 'indescribable'.

Even if we cannot find words to describe them, manufacturers spend millions of pounds describing them on television and in newspaper advertisements. They seek to persuade you that you cannot live the rest of your life without their product. It is a must have gift.

Why did Paul call Jesus the 'INDESCRIBABLE GIFT'?

BECAUSE OF THE NATURE OF JESUS

'When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets". "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God".

Matthew, 16:13-16, NIV

How can you describe Jesus? What words would you choose?

How can you describe a baby born of a virgin? How can you describe God in flesh, walking upon our earth and reaching out to the hurting masses of humanity? How can you describe that which is spirit when all we have ever known is that which is physical? How can you describe God who has all knowledge when all we have is limited knowledge? How can you describe God who is all powerful? How can you describe the eternal? How can you describe the indescribable?

In 451, the greatest theological minds of the time came together at **The Council of Chalcedon** and tried to describe Jesus. They came up with this description:

Perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood. Truly man of a reasonable, rational soul and body. Consubstantial, co-essential with the Father according to the manhood. In all things like unto us without sin. Begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead. And in these latter times for us and our salvation. Born of the Virgin Mary. According to the manhood, one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten to be acknowledged in two natures. Inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably and the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved.'

I have to admit that I did not understand all that.

But one think it does show me is that when the world brings together its greatest minds and our most extensive vocabularies, we cannot find the words to describe Jesus.

BECAUSE OF THE PURPOSE OF JESUS

'The angel said to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord".'

Luke, 2:10-11, NIV

At Christmas, we celebrate the fact that Jesus came into our world to save us.

God saw that mankind needed the one thing that only he could provide. God knew that we did not need better education, better health or better welfare. He knew that the one thing we needed most of all was the gift of his Son who alone can save us from our sins.

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!

2. THE BLESSINGS OF HIS HEAVEN

'He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.'

John, 1:11-13, NIV

Alexander the Great once gave a goblet to a servant who looked at it and, recognising its value, proclaimed: "This is too much for me to receive".

Alexander the Great looked at him and said: "But it is not too much for me to give".

How would you feel if you gave someone a gift and he simply ignored it?

Imagine that you had spent a considerable amount of money on that gift, and some time personally wrapping it, and he just left in on the table and never opened it. Chances are that if he decided not even to acknowledge it, then you would feel offended and unhappy. God offers us the gift of his Son – the 'INDESCRIBABLE GIFT' – but we must receive that gift for ourselves.

'[John, 1:11-13] is an explosive text, teaching as it does about a mysterious, invisible birth – a mystic birth... Such a text cannot be properly handled without getting into areas that some may consider radical. It cannot be handled without considering the fact that there are many people in the world who are God's creation but not God's children.'

A W Tozer

'Those who <u>RECEIVED</u> him... those who <u>BELIEVED</u> in his name... he gave <u>THE</u> <u>RIGHT TO BECOME</u> children of God.'

- You do not need to become something that you already are naturally by birth.
- We have been given the right, the power, to become children of God.
- There are two conditions for regeneration: you must <u>believe</u> and <u>receive</u>.

'All who welcome Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives are reborn spiritually, receiving new life from God. Through faith in Christ, this new birth changes us from the inside out – rearranging our attitudes, desires, and motives. Being born makes you physically alive and places you in your parents' family. Being born of God makes you spiritually alive and puts you in God's family. Have you asked Christ to make you a new person? This fresh start in life is available to all who believe in Christ.'

"LIFE APPLICATION BIBLE", Study Notes

The Bible teaches that when we receive Jesus, we receive the blessings of heaven...

We receive the blessing of the forgiveness of our sins.

This may be so elementary, so well-known, to us that we dismiss this truth too quickly. God forgives our sins, God forgets our sins, God will not remember our sins, God buries them forever. Although we deserve death, we receive mercy and forgiveness.

We receive the blessing of the adoption into the family of God.

Before I was 'A SINNER BY CHOICE AND AN ALIEN BY BIRTH, BUT I'VE BEEN ADOPTED, MY NAME'S WRITTEN DOWN'. I am an adopted child of the Almighty God. Everything that belongs to Jesus now belongs to me. We are brothers and sisters in the family of God sharing in the resources, responsibilities and rewards of citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

♣ We receive the blessing of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus promised that he would send 'ANOTHER COUNSELLOR' to us that will guide, counsel, protect and empower us. The Holy Spirit will give us Spiritual Gifts that will enable us to be fulfilled in the ministry of the Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit will produce fruit within us – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

We receive the blessing of the peace that passes all understanding.

A peace that the world does not know and cannot understand, but a perfect peace that allows us to cope with every and any situation. A perfect peace that allows us to look beyond the smuq and smog of our world to see the purity of God in Heaven.

We receive the blessing of a mansion in heaven.

Jesus left earth to prepare a place for us. When that preparation is complete, he will return like the Bridegroom returning at midnight for the Bride – the Church of God. There will be a great wedding feast to look forward to in heaven.

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his Heaven.

3. THE DEAR CHRIST ENTERS IN

'[Jesus said,] 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going".'

John, 14:1-4, NIV

According to the Son of God, Heaven is 'MY FATHER'S HOUSE'.

It is 'HOME' for all of God's true children. Some years ago, a London newspaper held a contest to determine the best definition of 'HOME'. The winning entry was: 'HOME IS THE PLACE WHERE YOU ARE TREATED THE BEST AND COMPLAIN THE MOST'. The poet Robert Frost said that home is the place that, when you arrive there, they have to take you in. It is a pretty good definition!

The Greek word 'MONE' is translated 'MANSIONS' and 'ABODE'.

It simply means 'ROOMS, ABIDING PLACES', so we must not think in terms of manor houses. It is unfortunate that some unbiblical songs have perpetuated the error that faithful Christians will have lovely mansions in glory, while worldly saints will have to be content with little cottages or even shacks. Jesus Christ is now preparing places for all true believers, and each place will be beautiful. When he was here on earth, Jesus was a carpenter. Now that he has returned to glory, he is building a church on earth and a home for that church in heaven.

John, 14:3 is a clear promise of our Lord's return for his people.

Some will go to heaven through 'THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH', but those who are alive when Jesus returns will never see death. They will be changed to be like Christ and will go to heaven without tasting death.

Many people missed out on the first coming of Christ; do not miss out on the second!

The priests called by King Herod to the palace in Jerusalem were well aware of the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. They heard from the magi that they had seen his star in the east and had come to worship him. Bethlehem is just five miles downhill from Jerusalem, but the priests did not go to see the Christ, Immanuel – God with us.

Simeon was anticipating the first Christmas.

He was waiting for the Messiah to come. The Holy Spirit had previously spoken to him and promised that he would not die before he saw the Christ. Now, the same Holy Spirit had moved him into the Temple.

'Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts.'

Luke, 2:25-27a, NIV

We use Simeon as an example of how we can be ready for the coming of Christ...

ARE YOU SAVED?

Simeon was righteous.

He was blameless, good, ho nourable, and upright.

But, more than that, when the Bible uses this word it refers to being right with God. Christians often wonder how people can be saved before Jesus was crucified. But this is to misunderstand Scripture. The Bible tells us that Jesus was the Lamb of God who was crucified before the foundation of the world. Simeon was saved because he was a man of faith. Simeon was saved because he was a man who looked ahead and was able to see the purpose of Christ.

ARE YOU SURRENDERED?

Simeon was devout.

He was pious and religious – both words conjure up negative feelings today. He was committed – a word that conjures up negative reactions. He was devoted and dedicated.

But, more than that, Simeon was looking forward to 'THE CONSOLATION OF ISRAEL'. In prayer, in worship, in humble and faithful expectation he was waiting for the day when God would finally comfort his people.

What is the passion of your life?

We are waiting for Jesus to come again. When we have this hope of the coming of Jesus within us, we want it to affect our life – we want to be holy people.

ARE YOU SPIRITUAL?

The Holy Spirit was upon Simeon.

The name 'SIMEON' means 'LISTENING ONE'.

The Holy Spirit had spoken to him. When we are saved, we have the person of the Holy Spirit within, but Simeon had more, he knew something of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Is the Holy Spirit upon you? Does the Holy Spirit have you?

'HE WHO HAS AN EAR, LET HIM HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS TO THE CHURCHES.'

ARE YOU SENSITIVE?

Simeon was moved by the Holy Spirit.

He was enthused, motivated, stimulated and stirred.

God spoke to Simeon, who was so wired up to God that he obeyed the moving of the Spirit. We do not know how the impulse of the Spirit came, but whatever Simeon experienced, it was enough for him to be convinced. Sometimes, we will not be moved no matter what shove we experience. But Simeon was open to what the Holy Spirit wanted to do within his life.

The Holy Spirit wants to guide us and reveal the truth of his coming to us.

SIMEON WAS SATISFIED

'Moved by the Spirit, Simeon went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God.'

Luke, 2:27b-28, NIV

Simeon took Jesus up into his arms and praised God.

I would be surprised if this was the only child brought that day into the Temple Courts to be presented to the Lord. There is no record of Simeon lifting up every child that came. But the Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that this child of peasant parents, was the promised Messiah.

THE WORD OF $\operatorname{GOD}\dots$ THE SON OF $\operatorname{GOD}\dots$ and THE SPIRIT OF GOD came together.

'[Jesus said,] "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world".'

John, 17:24, NIV

No ear may hear his coming; but in this world of sin, Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.