

“O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM”

“O Holy Child of Bethlehem”

Scripture Reading – Luke, 2:1-14

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.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “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. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger”.

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests”.

‘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

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.

“O HOLY CHILD OF BETHLEHEM”

Today, we consider the fourth, and final, verse of Phillips Brooks Christmas Carol...

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.

Christmas is traditionally a time for giving.

Ever since the magi arrived carrying gold, incense, and myrrh, people have been exchanging gifts at Christmas. Millions of people, both children and adults, will open unwanted gifts tomorrow. 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 even a senior citizen. 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 Christmas is really all about. On Christmas Day, 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.

What child is this who, laid to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping,

Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?

This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing:

Haste, haste to bring him laud, the Babe, the Son of Mary!

William Chatterton Dix, NCP 91

Who is this ‘Holy Child of Bethlehem’, and what does he offer us today?

1. THE CHILD 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 the Roman Emperors’ edict to move Mary and Joseph the eighty miles from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, in order to fulfil prophecy. Rome 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.

This occurred just as Scripture said, and Caesar unknowingly played an important part.

A T Pierson used to say, ‘HISTORY IS HIS STORY’, and former USA President **James A Garfield** called history ‘THE UNROLLED SCROLL OF PROPHECY’. If God’s Word controls our lives, then the events of history only help to fulfil the will and purposes 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

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 and small insignificant standing in Israel.

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

'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.'

I Corinthians, 1:26-29, NIV

So what does this mean for you and me today?

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

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.

2. THE CHILD OF PROMISE

'The angel answered Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God..."'

Luke, 1:34-35, NIV

Whose blood flowed through the arteries and veins of Jesus?

Nowadays, we know that a mother and her baby have totally separate blood supplies. In fact, the mother may have one blood type, whilst the baby may have another. The blood type of the baby is the same as that of the father. It is how courts today establish the paternity of a child.

Of course, God is spirit, so he has no blood, Or does he?


'[Paul said,] "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood".'

Acts, 20:28, NIV

Gabriel announced that the Baby would be called 'THE HOLY ONE'.

Therefore, he would not share the sinful human nature of man. His body was prepared for him by the Spirit of God who somehow 'OVERSHADOWED' Mary. The same word is applied to the

presence of God in the Holy of Holies in the Jewish tabernacle and the temple (see Exodus, 40:35). Mary's womb became a holy of holies for the Son of God.

 **JESUS KNEW NO SIN**

'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'

II Corinthians, 5:21, NIV

 **JESUS DID NO SIN**

"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

I Peter, 2:22, NIV

 **JESUS HAD NO SIN**

'You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.'

I John, 3:5, NIV

Where there is no sinless sacrifice, there can be no atonement.

Where there is no atonement, there can be no new birth.

Where there is no new birth, there can be no hope of heaven.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.

3. THE CHILD OF PROCLAMATION

'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. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger". Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests".'

Luke, 2:10-14, NIV

What an amazing birth announcement on that first Christmas morning.

The shepherds were terrified, but their fear turned to joy as the angels announced the Messiah's birth. The shepherds ran to see the baby; then they themselves spread the word.

The question is, if we have such a hope, why don't we want to tell it?

I do not go along with those who say that it shows that we have nothing to tell. Such people would have us questioning our own experience of Christ. I do not accept the line that others do not want to hear the news we have. Such people use that excuse in order not to share the Good News. But why would we not want to tell it?

YOU can tell out the sweet story, YOU, yes, YOU.

'Our churches are full of people who truly believe and want to follow the way of Jesus – but who cannot bring themselves to talk about their faith. "I would not know what to say" is the immediate reaction of many. Again there are those who are frightened to share their faith and experience because they do not want to embarrass their friends or be a 'bore'. The truth is that the timely word coming out of a genuine experience of Jesus Christ is never embarrassing and certainly never boring.'

Gavin Reid

'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.'

1 John, 1:1-4, NIV

Many people (including some Christians) have the idea that 'WITNESSING' means wrangling over the differences in religious beliefs, or sitting down and comparing churches. That is not what John had in mind. He tells us that witnessing means sharing our spiritual experiences with others – both by the lives that we live and by the words that we speak.

A witness needs to have SEEN something... he must have seen Jesus.

A witness needs to KNOW something... he cannot give a second-hand account.

A witness needs to SAY something... he cannot be a silent witness.

A witness needs to BE something... he must speak no matter what the cost.

'Jesus said, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels".'

Luke, 9:26, NIV

We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell.

4. THE CHILD OF PRESENCE

'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

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 it 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 RECEIVED him... those who BELIEVED in his name... he gave THE RIGHT TO BECOME 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 believe and receive.

Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.

'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.'

John, 1:14, NIV

By the miracle of 'THE VIRGIN BIRTH', 'THE WORD BECAME FLESH'.

Jesus took upon himself sinless human nature and identified with us in every aspect of life from birth to death. THE WORD was not an abstract concept of philosophy, but a real person who could be seen, touched, and heard. Christianity is Christ; Christ is God... and he lived with us.

'Jesus said, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me... I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing".'

John, 15:4-5, NIV

To 'REMAIN' means to abide, to stay closely connected, to settle in for the long term.

It means to be intimately connected to Christ. The greater our connection to Jesus, the more we tap into his power and presence – and the more fruit we can bear for him. To 'REMAIN' means to 'STAY, LINGER, WAIT' even to 'HANG ABOUT WITH'. The Bible uses the word 'FELLOWSHIP' and declares that we should have 'FELLOWSHIP' with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus commands his disciples to 'REMAIN'.

This is not a suggestion or a request. You command someone to do something because it is not going to come naturally. It was not something that came naturally to the disciples. They would have to work at it. It takes a conscious desire and effort for us to remain close to Jesus.

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel.