

Thoughts From Other Minds:

We have, in these verses, the story of a birth, - the birth of the incarnate Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Every birth of a living child is a marvellous event. ... But never since the world began was a birth so marvellous as the birth of Christ. In itself it was a miracle: - "God was manifest in the flesh." (1 Tim 3:16.) ...

In reading these verses, let us first notice *the times when Christ was born*. It was in the days when Augustus, the first Roman emperor, made "a decree that all the world should be taxed." The wisdom of God appears in this simple fact. The sceptre was practically departing from Judah. (Gen.49:10) The Jews were coming under the dominion and taxation of a foreign power Strangers were beginning to rule over them. They had no longer a really independent government of their own. The "due time", had come for the promised Messiah to appear. Augustus taxes "the world," and at once Christ is born. ...

Let us ever rest our souls on the thought that times are in God's hand. (Psalm 31:15.) He knows the best season for sending help to His church, and new light to the world. Let us beware of giving way to over anxiety about the course of events around us, as if we knew better than the King of kings what time relief should come. "Cease, Philip, to try to govern the world," was a frequent saying of Luther to an anxious friend. It was a saying full of wisdom.

Let us notice, secondly, *the place where Christ was born*. It was not at Nazareth of Galilee, where His mother, the Virgin Mary, lived. The prophet Micah had foretold that the event was to take place at Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2.) And so it came to pass. At Bethlehem Christ was born.

The overruling providence of God appears in this simple fact. He orders all things in heaven and earth. He turns the hearts of kings whithersoever He will. He overruled the time when Augustus decreed the taxing. He directed the enforcement of the decree in such a way that Mary must needs be at Bethlehem when "the days were accomplished that she should be delivered." Little did the haughty Roman emperor, and his officer Cyrenius, think that they were only instruments in the hand of the God of Israel ... carrying out the eternal purposes of the King of kings. ...

The heart of a believer should take comfort in the recollection of God's providential government of the world. A true Christian should never be greatly moved or disquieted by the conduct of the rulers of the earth. He should see with the eye of faith a hand overruling all that they do to the praise and glory of God. He should regard every king and potentate, - an Augustus, a Cyrenius, a Darius, a Cyrus, a Sennacherib - as a creature who, with all his power, can do nothing but what God allows, and nothing which is not carrying out God's will. And when the rulers of this world "set themselves against the Lord" he should take comfort in the words of Solomon, "There be higher than they." (Eccles. 5:8.)

J C Ryle, Expository Thoughts on Luke, Vol. 1, pp. 30-33.

Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Pastoral Charge 18 December 2016

Sermon: "*The coming of the Lord*" (text: Luke 2:1-20)

Scripture: Micah 5:1-5a; Luke 2:1-20

Sermon Notes

Introduction: We come in our 'leading up to Christmas' studies in the opening chapters of Luke's gospel to the Christmas event, the birth of Jesus, Mary's firstborn son. Again we are reminded of Luke's concern for history, and of our need of confidence in his history, bringing together as it does the natural and the supernatural.

The pre-medieval church came to believe Mary to be 'ever virgin'; but the Bible does not teach that Jesus' birth was supernatural. The doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity arose from unbiblical attitudes towards sex. We insist on his miraculous virginal conception but believe Mary and Joseph thereafter had a normal marriage.

His natural birth is in Luke's account quickly followed by the supernatural—angels, with a message from God; we are glad of the confidence we have in him as a careful historian; yes, his gospel is scripture (1 Tim 5:18) and from the Holy Spirit, who worked with and through Luke to give us a reliable record of what happened.

1. Earthly humiliation

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus speaks of earthly humiliation, that the Son of God should be born in abject poverty, in a stable, laid in a manger because 'there was no room for them in the inn'; he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant; he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich (Phil 2:7-7; 2 Cor 8:9).

His humility was voluntary, by design, so that we who follow him might not be surprised if we are strangers in the world. His humiliation began before his birth; his was a conquered nation; Caesar Augustus ruled. Zealots ground their teeth in impotent rage—but God was dealing with a difficult situation and fulfilling his word.

If Jesus had been born in Nazareth people would have known that Mary hadn't been married to Joseph long enough for Jesus to have been conceived after their marriage. The Jews appear to have had some suspicions about Jesus' birth (cf. Jn 8:41); how much worse it would have been if he had been born in Nazareth!

God's plan was for him to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). To fulfil his word and to protect Mary Jesus must be born not in Nazareth but in Bethlehem—and so Joseph and Mary and Himself had to endure the humiliation of being compelled to go there by the decree of a foreigner, 80 or 90 miles over hilly country.

We may be sure that if we put ourselves in God's hands and obey him as Mary did that he will take care of us and our problems. No doubt she considered the problems a virgin pregnancy might bring—but she trusted the Lord, and he did not fail her; if we do as she did, we will find the Lord as kind and caring as she did.

2. Heavenly glory

The Lord's choice of Mary was typical of the 'great reversals' of the gospel (Lk 1:51-53). We also see this reversal in God's choice of the shepherds as witnesses of the birth of his son. Despised by the Jews, they were honoured by God as believers, for they were waiting for the Saviour (vs. 9-10, cf. Ps 25:14).

God reveals himself and his good things to people who humbly believe his word; he revealed the birth of 'Christ the Lord' to the humble believing shepherds (v. 11); he is 'Christ', the Lord's anointed, Mary's son, and the Lord himself—and so he is Saviour, for salvation is of the Lord, but one with us in our humanity.

The shepherds were also to be witnesses of his coming, by seeing for themselves (v. 12) and then by knowing what he had come to do (vs. 13-14). 'In the highest' is 'in heaven'; 'glory' is God's revelation of himself, in blinding light (v. 9) or in things that express his majesty (cf. Jn 2:11, 11:40).

To 'give God the glory' means to honour God for himself and his works (cf. Jn 9:24). God's great goal in creation providence and redemption is the revelation and acknowledgment by his creation of his glory. 'Glory to god' means his glory is about to be revealed in the birth, life and sacrificial death of his Son (Jn 12:23).

Why does God allow evil? There are many mysteries—but certainly for his glory. If God had not allowed evil/sin then there would be no need for the Saviour, no incarnation, not revelation of God's great love (Jn 3:16), and we would not have known the Son of God 'who loved me and gave himself for me'.

The goodwill that would be revealed on earth is not the goodwill commonly associated with Christmas, goodwill between people, but God's goodwill, his favour, his pleasure (cf. Eph 1:3-5; Phil 2:12-13, AV); our salvation is not of our free will, but of God's goodwill, not of our works, but of his grace, for his glory alone.

3. Earthly confirmation

The shepherds believed—but was their faith true faith, resting on facts? The angel had given them 'the sign' (v. 12) and so they went to see, not because they did not see or because they doubted the angel's message, but as God's appointed witnesses of the coming of the Saviour.

Then, having become witnesses by seeing, they became witnesses in telling what they knew; as believers, we are also witnesses, apostles of his infant fame, with the good news of his coming, his life, death, resurrection and coming again, of forgiveness and peace with God through faith in him.

If you are not sure of saving faith in him I commend Mary to you. Her faith in Jesus as her Lord did not come quickly; during his public ministry she thought him 'out of his mind (Mk 3:20, 31); but she treasured up what she saw and heard in her heart' to become a disciple (Acts 1:14); if you will do likewise with a sincere desire to know the truth, then you too will know the peace he gives those who believe in him.

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My Notes:

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why do we insist that Mary conceived Jesus while still a virgin, but not upon the doctrine of her perpetual virginity? What wrong view of sex and marriage is suggested by the teaching of Mary as 'ever virgin'?
2. Reflect upon the providence of God in Mary's conceiving in Nazareth but in giving birth to Jesus in Bethlehem (and then the flight to Egypt); what assurance does this give us when we find it difficult to trust and obey God's word?
3. How do we see the 'great reversal' celebrated in the Magnificat in God's choice of the shepherds? What does this tell us about the sort of persons to whom God reveals his secrets? (Ps 25:14).
4. The shepherds saw the glory of the Lord—but the angels spoke of 'Glory to God in the highest'; reflect upon the following texts and what they teach about God's glory: John 2:11, 9:24, 11:40, 12:23-24.
5. The angels spoke of 'goodwill'; reflect on Ephesians 1:3-5 and Philippians 2:12-13 (best in Authorised Version); what does it mean to be saved 'not by our free-will but by God's goodwill'?