

Luke 2:1-21

Introduction

Over Easter, we read about the final days of Jesus' earthly life: we read of his death on a cross, his resurrection from the grave and his ascension to heaven.

Now, we're going back to the beginning, to the start of his earthly life, as recorded for us in chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel. We're carrying on where we left off at Christmas, when we worked our way through chapter 1.

The Bible doesn't tell us much about Jesus' early years. In fact, it tells us very little about anything he said or did before he reached adulthood. So what it does tell us must be significant.

Given Luke's repeated statement that Mary, Jesus' mother, stored up these things in her heart, it seems very possible that these stories came from her. We know that Luke investigated everything very carefully before he wrote his Gospel, and he may well have spoken with Mary himself and heard these things directly from her lips.

If so, what she told him, first of all, was of humble beginnings. That's our first heading as we read this account together: humble beginnings.

Humble beginnings

Please look down again at verse 1.

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 their 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 guest room available for them.

Luke sets the scene for us and places the events of Jesus' birth in a particular period of history. He tells us that it happened in the days of Caesar Augustus, who was the first Roman Emperor. Caesar Augustus was the grandnephew of the great Roman General, Julius Caesar, who adopted him as his son and heir. He reigned as Emperor from 27 B.C. until his death in A.D. 14.

His real name wasn't, in fact, Augustus. It was Gaius Octavian. He was given the name Augustus by the Roman Senate. It was a name that suggested divine qualities. He received titles such as 'Saviour' and 'Son of God'. He was the most powerful man in the world with the wealth and might of Rome at his disposal.

There's a wonderful irony, then, that it was during *his* reign that the true Saviour and Son of God was coming into the world: Jesus Christ.

As Luke tells us the story, he takes us to a little town called Bethlehem, and he adds an important detail. He tells us that this is the town of David. David was the great king of Israel many hundreds of years earlier and this town of Bethlehem is where he was from. It's also where Joseph was from. So when Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world, Joseph made the journey to Bethlehem to register, along with his pregnant fiancée, because, Luke says, he belonged to the house and line of David.

That's significant.

God had promised king David that, one day, one of his descendants would sit on his throne. This descendant would rule over a kingdom that would never end. And now, as the angel tells the shepherds a few verses further on, that descendant was about to be born. From now on Bethlehem would be identified with an even greater king, Jesus the Messiah, or Christ, who rules over an eternal kingdom, and is our Saviour and Lord. The greatness and glory of his kingdom far exceeds that of king David, and even of Caesar Augustus and the Roman Empire.

So in the days of Caesar Augustus, who received titles such as 'Saviour' and 'Son of God', the one who truly is Saviour and Son of God is about to be born.

But note, though, that Luke's account moves quickly from *power* to *poverty*. It moves from the most powerful man in the world, who lives in the comfort and luxury of his Roman palace, to a poor carpenter and his pregnant fiancée, who arrive in Bethlehem to find there's nowhere for them to stay. There are no rooms available. They end up bedding down with animals. And it's here that their baby is born.

The birth of the King of kings, the Saviour of God's people, who would sit on an eternal throne, and rule over the greatest kingdom the world has ever seen, is as mundane and lowly as it could possibly be. There's no palace nursery for Jesus. He's born in a room shared with cattle and laid in their feeding trough as his crib.

To say that God's ways are unusual is an understatement.

One thing the birth of Jesus shows us is the degree to which he humbled himself for us and, therefore, the depth of his love for us.

Jesus was rich far beyond anything Augustus could have imagined. Before his birth, he existed in eternity in the glory of heaven. But he left the glory of heaven and stooped low, becoming not only a man, but a baby, born to a poor unmarried couple, with a feeding trough for a bed.

There is no one in all history who has humbled themselves further, or lowered themselves more, than Jesus. He emptied himself of every ounce of heavenly glory when he took to himself a human nature, being born as a baby. Don't believe the paintings that show baby Jesus bathed in amber light, with a golden halo above his head. Baby Jesus was no more outwardly or visibly glorious than any other baby. He laid aside *all* his glory to become a tiny baby, fully dependent on his mother to dress him, and clean him, and meet all his physical needs. And, of course, his self-humbling didn't end there. As an adult he humbled himself even further, even to the shame and indignity of death on a cross, as we've celebrated this Easter.

And he did that for us. He emptied himself of all his glory for us. Why? Why did God the Son humble himself to such a degree? It was because of love. God the Son laid aside the glory that was his in eternity, in order to be born as a baby, and then as a man, to die on a cross. He came among us as one who serves. And he did it because of love, so that the one who trusts in him might be with him forever in heaven. If you doubt how loved you are by God, then look at Jesus and all that he gave up... for you.

Another thing the birth of Jesus shows us is what greatness looks like in God's eyes, and what it doesn't look like.

The things that are prized by the world are not what are prized by God. He doesn't count greatness in terms of a person's wealth or their worldly status. Greatness in his eyes isn't seen in externalities such as possessions and appearance but in inner qualities, such as humility and service. Jesus is the greatest person the world has ever seen, yet he didn't swagger around in expensive clothes and jewellery. He came in humility, taking, in the apostle Paul's words, the very nature of a servant.

Perhaps sometimes we're too easily impressed by someone's wealth or their status. I know I can be. Perhaps sometimes we feel less valuable than others because we lack these things, or more valuable if we possess them. Perhaps sometimes we find ourselves chasing after them. We need to understand that we're seeing things the world's way when we think like that. We only learn to see things *God's* way as we take our eyes off the things the world values and fix our attention on what *he* values: the inner qualities we find displayed in his Son. That's what we should prize in others and strive for, with God's help, in ourselves.

And thirdly, the birth of Jesus shows us the kind of people he came for. The humble circumstances surrounding his birth point us to the fact that he came especially for those whom the world values little.

And we see that, particularly, in the way in which his birth is announced. An angel announces the good news to lowly shepherds.

Our second heading: Good news for all people.

Good news for all people

Please look down at verse 8.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, 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 that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, 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 heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'**

God's unusual ways continue with the announcement of Jesus' birth.

Luke draws our attention away from the town of Bethlehem and to the fields around it. There we find shepherds, who are living in the fields and looking after their flocks.

To be a shepherd was a lowly profession but it was an ordinary, everyday job. These are normal, everyday people.

And it's to these shepherds that an angel appears; one of the most exalted and glorious creatures in the universe.

We know the story well. We celebrate it every Christmas. The shepherds are terrified, and it's easy to understand why. But the angel tells them not to be afraid, for he brings good news. And it's to *them*, the shepherds, that he announces the baby's birth.

Here's the point: this is the kind of people to whom the good news of Jesus comes. It doesn't come to the great and powerful, who think they're fine without him; it comes to lowly and everyday people, who recognise their need of him.

Both the nature of Jesus' birth and the announcement of the good news reveal the same truth: Jesus is the Saviour of all, but especially of those whom the world values little, who recognise their need of salvation. When the king of heaven entered our world, he didn't shut himself away with the elite and powerful. He didn't remain aloof from the masses and live in elitist isolation. He came to the poor and lowly. He was born *among* them. And the good news of his birth was announced not through a court circular but to shepherds as they watched their flocks in the fields.

The good news of Jesus is for everyone, but especially for everyday, normal, ordinary people, like you and me.

It's news that will cause great joy for those who welcome it and believe it...and that's because we now that we're not the kind of people who deserve God's love. There's nothing about us that merits God's favour. We've done nothing to warrant his kindness. Yet the God of the universe, who made and sustains all things, *loves us anyway*.

We know that we've done nothing to merit salvation, yet the God of the universe *saved us anyway*, by giving his Son for us!

He's our saviour. He didn't come to enslave us to rules or to steal away our fun. He came to save us from all that hurts and harms and enslaves us. He came to give us life...real life...through the forgiveness of our sins.

He's the Messiah, God's king. He came to bring God's love to all who would receive him.

And he is Lord: the one who rightly deserves our devotion.

The coming of Jesus really is good news.

It's the news that everyday, ordinary people like you and me can experience God's favour, through the forgiveness of our sins. We can live each day in God's love and blessing.

That's news we can get excited about. And it's news that's confirmed by experience.

That's our final heading: Confirmed by experience.

Confirmed by experience

Please look down with me at verse 15.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

How should we respond to the good news of Jesus?

Well, the first thing to do, if you haven't done this already, is to check it out for yourself. That's what the shepherds did. The best way to do that is to read one of the accounts of the life of Jesus that are contained in the Bible. Perhaps, if you haven't done so already, you might read through the rest of Luke's account. We're going to be looking at it together over the next few weeks and meeting people who had encounters with Jesus. We'll see how it changed their lives.

Many of us will already have done that. And our experience will be the same as that of the shepherds. They listened to what God told them, and then, when they checked it out, they discovered that everything was just as they had been told. God's words to them were borne out in their experience. And it will be the same for many of us.

Let's take some examples.

God promises in the Bible that, if we come to Jesus in repentance and faith, then we will experience a peace that we've never known before, that comes from knowing that our sins are forgiven and that we're loved and accepted by God. And many of us will have found that promise of peace to be true in our own experience.

God promises in the Bible that, if we come to Jesus in repentance and faith, then he will be with us and give us strength to face the various challenges that come our way day by day. And many of us will have found that promise of daily strengthening to be true, particularly at the points when we felt weakest.

God promises in the Bible that, if we come to Jesus in repentance and faith, then we can pray to God in the confidence that he hears our prayers and answers us in keeping with his love and wisdom. And many of us will have found that to be true as well.

There are many other promises that we have found to be true.

Like the shepherds, our experience is that things are just as we have been told in the Bible. We have found, in our own experience, that God's words are true and trustworthy.

And that's something that we can easily share with others. So, secondly, like the shepherds, we can testify to what we've discovered about God in our own personal experience, and tell people how we've found the things he tells us in the Bible to be true. That's not difficult. We're simply telling them what we've discovered ourselves.

Thirdly, we should glorify and praise God for all that we've experienced of him. We do that as we pray to him, and tell others about him, and as we sing - and we're especially looking forward to being able to sing God's praises together again in church, in the coming weeks.

And there's a fourth thing we should do. If we've looked into the things God says to us in the Bible, and found his words to be trustworthy and true, then we should obey him. That's what Mary does.

Before she even conceived, the angel Gabriel visited Mary and told her that she was going to have a baby. He told her that she would give birth to a son, and that she was to call him Jesus. And that's what she does.

Verse 21.

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

If we have found God's words to be reliable and true, then we won't simply share with others the things we have discovered, and we won't simply praise God for all that he's done for us, we'll also obey God's word, because we trust that what he tells us is for our good and blessing.

We'll check out the things we've been told. We'll share what we discover with others. We'll praise God for his goodness to us. And we'll obediently follow him all the days of our lives.

Let's pray.