

Christmas Midnight – Sermon

Tonight we are celebrating the greatest story ever told and heard by humanity; as we retell the astonishing entrance that God made into our broken world as a vulnerable child to show us all the way home.

Something new had happened; something original and fresh had been revealed; nothing would ever be quite the same again. As foretold by the ancient scriptures and promised by prophets, God has taken flesh in the womb of a young maiden, and like all flesh was born as a fragile bundle of new life. God visited his people – not through the dreams and words of prophets as in the past, but in human flesh. The God who lived in the highest heavens has chosen another address, as he has decided to pitch his tent among us.

Our Gospel summaries this wonderful coming of God to his people in the words of the angel that appeared to the Shepherds, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" –

If we are to comprehend the weight of the Incarnation and share in the True Joy of Christmas, as expressed by the praises of the heavenly host, we are to remind ourselves what exactly is happening at this Christ's birth and what God is speaking to each of us as he comes to us in his Son Jesus Christ the Lord. The details of our gospel story have significant messages and meanings packed into them.

Firstly, we are told of a decree from the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus (who was the lord of the civilized world) that the known world should be registered, and counted. In mentioning the then superpower of the world, the evangelist Luke is contrasting Christ the Lord with the lord Caesar! He is comparing Caesar's kingdom and Christ's kingdom. In Caesars's kingdom census is carried out to tax people sharply, draft them more efficiently into the army, and manage the empire more thoroughly.

However, a census where you have to go to your ancestral village to be registered is the last thing Mary and Joseph would have wanted, as that meant they had to travel from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. At this time Mary would have been heavily pregnant and a journey of about 150 km on foot or on a donkey is not what you want during the last week of your pregnancy. Mary would have

wondered whether God could have planned this a little better? after all, this is the Son of God that she is about to give birth to.

We too question God from time to time when things go terribly wrong, Couldn't you plan this a little better? But the point made here is that Real Divine Power is above worldly power and uses worldly power for divine purposes. The Messiah was meant to be born in the city of David in Bethlehem near Jerusalem. Therefore, while the powers of the world do seem to be in control, and Mary and Joseph seem to be going through a difficult time, God's plans and purposes are being carried out on a deeper level.

Secondly, we hear that Mary gave birth to her first-born son wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn. The story develops to be even more difficult for the holy couple. There is no proper place to lodge or give birth to a child, let alone the Son of God, the Messiah.

Again, Mary and Joseph could have wondered, where is God in all this? Where is his providence for his only begotten Son? Christ the Lord has no place in the inn, no room even in the little traveller's hostel in tiny Bethlehem, and had to find a stable and a crib for his birth.

We are meant to contrast this poor setting with Caesar Augustus on his Palatine Hill in Rome, his palace of luxury where the census decree would have gone out, it would have been the most comfortable and safest place imaginable, more fit for the Son of God to be born, but not meant to be.

Yet again, God is stating that Real Divine Power and Presence are found in humble places where the ego is not protected but exposed for the sake of love and truth. Lord Jesus was born not in a palace but in a stable.

While having material wealth and living a comfortable life is no sin of its own, we are reminded that each time we encounter material loss, set-backs, or dead-ends, we are not abandoned nor forgotten by God, but as he was with his own Son he is with us, bringing his plans and purposes to fulfillment. God is found in places of need and humility. God's job description in Jesus is not so much

to give us a life without trouble, sickness, and heartaches but to save us, and lead us home in Christ.

Next, we hear, that the Christ child born of Mary was wrapped up, tied, and confined in swaddling clothes; while good for the child to be kept nice and warm, it signifies that this Christ child is bound by his Father's will and tied to the good of the world he has come to serve and save. Christ's obedience to the Father's will throughout his life until he was bound on the cross, is the source of the salvation he offers to each of us who find it difficult to obey God and his will and commands.

Christ accomplishes what no human being could ever do in human history; perfect obedience to the Father's will. This is in contrast again to Caesar who is free to do as he pleases, when he wants, what he wants. Yet again Real Divine Power is found not in the freedoms that the world offers but in the obedience to God's will. When we are not as free as we want to be in the worldly sense, remember it might be the will of God to save us according to his plans – obey him.

Then we move to the note about the shepherds. The marginal situation of Jesus' birth, on the outskirts of the town, makes it accessible to a group, particularly on the margins of society themselves. The shepherds of Bethlehem are the first of the 'poor' to whom, by the scriptural promises, the "good news" of the Saviour's birth is announced.

We ought not to be romantic about the shepherds. In New Testament times shepherds were considered shady characters unable to hold a job, unreliable, and dishonest. So questionable was their reputation that their testimony was inadmissible in a court of law. They would be the last people Caesars of the world would associate with. Yet, it is to them that a messenger from the heavenly court appears. They were the first group who saw the Christ Child. Yet again Mary and Joseph would have wondered, where are the scribes, Pharisees, and the priests? Shouldn't the religious authorities come and worship the long-awaited Messiah? Why are the shepherds here out of all other possibilities?

Jesus would continue to have questionable company throughout his life until he was crucified between two thieves. He began his public life in the muddy

waters of Jordan shoulder to shoulder with sinners, he ate and drank with tax collectors, sinners, and people with bad reputations. Yet again, the Real Divine Power and presence are found in the ordinary, the lowly, and the unsavoury. God has come into the messiness of human life. This is why Jesus would later say, I have come for the sick and not for the healthy. While Caesar would meet his enemy through some form of violence, Christ meets his enemy, which is sin in humanity with engagement and invitations to change through love.

All of us have relational issues in our families, at work, at church, and in various other social settings. Like Christ, we are not to look for perfect people and perfect relationships but to bring forgiveness, understanding, and love to our existing ones. God is found in the messiness of our relationships as well.

This is the key message of Christmas. That God has come from his perfect heaven to our very imperfect world; from his sinless realm to this sinful place; to save us from all that is not of him and his Eternal Kingdom. He has come into our poverty, our sinfulness, and our messiness, to save us.

Caesar's Kingdom has long gone and so will all other earthly kingdoms! But the Kingdom initiated by the Christ Child still stands after 2000 + years in his Church and will continue to be there until the end. The question is – are we more interested in Caesar's kingdom or Christ's kingdom? So, let us remind ourselves and renew our faith in our God who comes to us, into our darkness, into our lives and hearts, into our families and relationships, into our mess, to heal, to forgive, to restore; in a word to SAVE us. Let's allow him to be born in our lives anew.