

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Dr. Gordon Hughes

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Good morning! Here we are on Christmas Eve. Another year has almost run its course. Where's it all gone? In many homes today, there will be a Christmas tree with presents of all sorts of sizes and shapes beneath it. Some of them may have already been handled and squeezed to try to determine in advance what's inside. But tomorrow, God willing, as the presents are unwrapped, all will be revealed!

So much of life today is about seeing what's inside. Using ultra sound, mothers to be can see the baby growing within the womb, and know in advance whether it's a boy or a girl. Using X-rays or magnetic resonance imaging, doctors are able to see inside our bodies and detect abnormalities.

Thankfully, no techniques exist today for showing what we are thinking in our hearts. There are times when I would hate my innermost thoughts to be blazoned abroad - and perhaps you would feel the same. But God sees and knows what's going on in our hearts. Through the prophet Jeremiah, He tells us, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart" (17:9-10). Those searching words pull us all up short. It's good, then, if we can pray, like the psalmist David, "Search me, O God, and know my heart...and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24).

Have you ever thought that the events of that first Christmas showed up dramatically what many people were thinking in their hearts? I love the story of how, forty days after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph, as Jewish law required, brought Him to the temple. There, the aged priest, Simeon, who had been promised by God that he would not die until he had seen God's promised Saviour, was waiting. Luke tells us, "[Simeon] took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: 'Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel'. Simeon then turned to Mary and, in a deeply significant prophecy, said, 'Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed'" (Luke 2:21-35). Notice those words, "that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed".

This morning, I want us to think about how the hearts of many people were revealed that first Christmas time. And as Christmas has succeeded Christmas, so the hearts of people everywhere, particularly as regards their attitude to Christ, have gone on being revealed. This Christmas will be no exception.

Mary and Joseph.

We'll read first the familiar account from Luke's Gospel: "Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, 'Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!' But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS' ...Then Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I do not know a man?' And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God...For with God nothing shall be impossible'" (Luke 1:26-37).

Down through the centuries, Jewish women had hoped that they might be the one chosen of God to be the mother of the long promised Messiah. Now the time had come, and Mary was to be that mother. But would the neighbours believe her? And more importantly, perhaps, would Joseph believe her?

Having a fiancée who was expecting a baby and knowing that he was not the father of her child must have been a major problem for Joseph. Matthew tells us about it: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph,

son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins." Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel", which is translated, "God with us". Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS."

So Mary and Joseph were clearly shown to have obedient hearts. Each of them was totally ready to do all that God required of them. How eagerly they would have joined in that hymn of Frances Ridley Havergal:

*"Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee..."*

The hymn continues:

*"Take my will, and make it Thine:
It shall be no longer mine:
Take my heart: it is Thine own,
It shall be Thy royal throne."*

What about our hearts this Christmas time? Are they open and obedient to what God is saying to us?

The people in Bethlehem.

In their obedience, Mary and Joseph made that long and difficult journey from their home town of Nazareth to Bethlehem. As prospective parents of the long-promised Messiah, did they think that there would a special welcome for them in this royal city of David? Luke tells us about it: "And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:1-7).

There's a haunting quality about those words, "no room for them in the inn". They show us that the people of Bethlehem had indifferent hearts. They might rejoice in meeting up again with friends whom they had not seen for many years, but in their merrymaking, they were totally unaware of the tremendous fact that the Son of God was about to be born in their midst - nor could they care!

In all the celebrations that will go on in Christmas 2006, how many will there be who really care about the fact that, on that first Christmas, the Son of God came to be the Saviour of the world? Without Him, there would never have been Christmas!

But there were those who welcomed His birth!

The shepherds.

We take up the story again from Luke's Gospel: "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!" So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger" (Luke 2:8-16).

These shepherds left their flocks, their livelihood, and hurried into Bethlehem to greet their Saviour. They were the very first visitors to welcome the baby Jesus! By their actions, they plainly showed that their hearts were welcoming hearts. Their readiness to receive the Lord Jesus stands out in beautiful contrast to the indifference of the people of Bethlehem.

What kind of a welcome is there in our hearts for the Lord Jesus this Christmas time? Are you able to take up the words of the hymn and say,

*“O Lord, in my heart there’s a welcome for Thee.
Gladly I now would say,
Come in, blessed Saviour, my heart and my life
Henceforth would own Thy sway.”*

The wise men.

We ought first to say that, contrary to the scenes often depicted on Christmas cards, a careful reading of the Gospel record indicates that it is likely that the visit of the wise men took place some considerable time later. It would be made, not to the manger in the stable, but to a house in Bethlehem where Mary and Joseph were still staying. We do not actually know how many wise men there were, other than the fact that three different kinds of gifts were brought to the child Jesus. Matthew tells us about it: “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” When Herod the king heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.”’ Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.” When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:1-11).

These wise men, or magi, who would have been important men in their own countries, recognised that they were in the presence of an even greater. Their opened treasures, which they presented to the Christ Child, flowed, first and foremost, from their opened hearts.

It may be that this Christmas time you feel that you do not have much in the way of treasure to bring to the Lord Jesus. If so, Christina Rossetti’s beautiful carol reminds us:

*“What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd,
I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man,
I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him -
Give my heart.*

King Herod.

Herod’s hatred stands out in dark contrast to the worship of the wise men. We continue the story from Matthew’s Gospel: “Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way... Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men” (verses 12-16).

Herod failed to see in the Lord Jesus the One who had come to be the Saviour of the world, and that included Herod himself. Herod saw Jesus only as a threat to his throne and so was determined to do away with Jesus. In this way, Herod showed his hateful heart.

How will your heart be revealed this Christmas time? The words of the Lord Jesus remind us that indifference is as bad as hatred: “He who is not with Me is against Me” (Matthew 12:30). This Christmas time, the Lord Jesus looks for hearts that are opened up to Him in obedience and love.

I love the story of the school nativity play. The innkeeper had roughly turned away Mary and Joseph. Then, as he watched them sadly move off, the innkeeper, caught up in the spirit of the play, with tears starting to form in his eyes,

cried out, "No! Don't go, Joseph. You and Mary can have my room." Some people thought that the innkeeper had spoiled the play. Others recognised that he had discovered what Christmas is all about!

We'll close with a Christmas poem by Hazel Dixon:

*"The shepherds have come and found Him,
Worshipped, and gone with joy
To spread the word that was told them
Of this Babe, this wondrous Boy.*

*Now, in the silence, Mary
Watching her sleeping Son,
Treasures and ponders in her heart
All that her God has done:*

*True Man, a Child is born -
True God, a Son is given!
Like her, let me treasure and ponder these things -
Jesus, the Saviour, King of all kings,
Glorified now in heaven."*

In conclusion, all of us at 'Truth for Today' wish you all a happy and blessed Christmas!

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