

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Introduction

Good morning I trust you will have a very happy Christmas Day.

I remember when our children were young, that Christmas excitement seemed to come to a climax on Christmas Eve and it was difficult to get excited children to bed. It was not until all were soundly asleep that we could start with the stockings to be placed near their beds and retrieve the toys from various hiding places so that they would all be ready for Christmas morning. Also, the early mornings, as excited children delved into their Christmas stockings at four in the morning and the need to persuade them that a few more hours sleep would be really helpful for Mum and Dad!

It has been interesting, over the years, to observe our own children going through the same experience with their children!

Our talk this morning concerns the very first Christmas Day and the events that preceded and followed that momentous occasion. Only two of the four Gospel writers give us the dramatic events leading up to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us consider the Christmas story under the following headings.

1. The Greatest Gift
2. The Greatest Announcement
3. The Greatest Person

1. The Greatest Gift

To introduce the greatest gift I will read a well known verse from John 3:16 (New International Version). "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" In this verse we read that God gave His Son. We will consider in our Christmas story the way in which this giving was made. It involved a very remarkable event, the Son of God being born as a man - the virgin birth! Paul in his letter to the Christians at Philippi wrote, "*Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man...*", Philippians 2:5-8 (New International Version).

Mary's Story

With these Scriptures in mind, let us now turn to Luke 1. Luke starts with the account of the birth of John the Baptist. This is very interesting and much can be learned from a careful reading of the people involved, which I commend to all who are listening this morning.

I want to start from Luke 1:26, the events surrounding Mary. Elizabeth is six months pregnant with baby John when the angel Gabriel is sent to Mary. Mary is engaged to be married to Joseph. The engagement for Mary and Joseph was a very serious matter. The engagement was part of the formalities, culminating in the wedding ceremony. It was a binding commitment and there would be no changing of the mind. It would be a disgrace not only to Mary and Joseph but to both their families and relatives if a break up occurred.

Within seconds of Gabriel appearing and greeting Mary, he tells her that she is going to conceive and have a son whose name is to be Jesus. Naturally speaking, Mary is troubled and she says but I am not married in the fullest sense, I don't know a man. But this was to be no ordinary conception; it was of God. Also Gabriel tells Mary that Elizabeth, her cousin, is in her sixth month of pregnancy. Then Mary submits to all that Gabriel has said with those wonderful words from Luke 1:38, "*'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May it be to me as you have said'*" (New International Version). In these few words we see Mary taking the place of a servant and ready to do whatever the Lord requires. Whatever the difficulties might be in the future, Mary is content to know that the Lord will work everything out for His glory. This surely is a challenge for us. Are we ready to be directed in our lives, especially when the pathway looks difficult?

It would seem that Mary decides to visit her cousin following the angel Gabriel's visit. As Mary greets Elizabeth, Mary gives her news of her interview with Gabriel. The news reaches the unborn baby John through his mother, Elizabeth, and we are told that the baby makes a sudden movement at the same time. We are told that Elizabeth becomes filled with the Holy Spirit and speaks out: *"In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!'"* (Luke 1:42-45, New International Version). Notice that Elizabeth says *"the mother of my Lord"*. This is an important and a very personal statement by Elizabeth which shows her true relationship to God.

Mary stays with Elizabeth about three months before returning to her own home. We are not informed as to when Mary gave the news to Joseph, but it may well have been upon her return from visiting Elizabeth.

Joseph's Story

Let us now consider Joseph by turning to the Gospel of Matthew. Joseph is confronted with the news. Let us read a few verses from Matthew 1. *"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' - which means, 'God with us.' When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus"* (Matthew 1:18-25, New International Version).

We can learn a lot about Joseph from these verses. Joseph was a righteous man who lived a godly life which God found acceptable. Although Mary was pregnant, Joseph's care for Mary is very evident in the expression, *"did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly"* (Matthew 1:19, New International Version). Joseph did not want Mary to be exposed to the cruelty of public scandal. In our country things have so changed that a situation like this does not so much as raise an eyebrow. But this is not what God expects as we observe His standards when reading Scripture. The next thing we notice is that Joseph is taking his time to consider the situation before rushing into any action. So Joseph shows two characteristics that we can emulate in our lives, a caring attitude and not to be hasty in judgment and action. Our Christmas story has some very real and positive blessings that we can build into our lives. The caring attitude stems from love, love that is seen in perfection in God, *"God so loved"*, John 3:16 (King James Version).

It was now Joseph's turn to be visited by an angel. Let us read again from Matthew 1, *"But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'"* (Matthew 1:20-21).

Matthew 1:22-23 show that what was happening to Joseph and Mary was the fulfilment of prophecy, see Isaiah 7:14. Isaiah made the prophecy approximately 750 years before it was fulfilled. The angel's message came to Joseph in a dream and when he awoke he obeys the angel's instructions but, as Matthew 1:25 shows, Joseph *"had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."*

The birth of Jesus

Turning back to the Gospel of Luke we take up the Christmas story as Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem, Luke 2:4. Why was it necessary for Joseph and Mary to make such a long journey of 65 miles "as the crow flies"? It would be considerably longer following roads over hills, round mountains and traversing valleys. They probably travelled in company with many others making a similar journey. It was all because of Caesar Augustus, in Rome. Augustus wanted to know how many people lived in his empire for tax purposes. Nothing has changed much in the past 2,000 years we are still paying taxes! This census required people to return and register at their family home. Joseph and Mary belonged to the family of King David of the tribe of Judah. Bethlehem was their ancestral home. When you have time, read 1 Samuel 16:1-13 which gives the events of David being anointed by the prophet Samuel at Bethlehem. Luke 2:6-7 (New International Version) states, *"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."* Joseph, no doubt, ensured that they arrived at Bethlehem in time to settle into their accommodation before the baby arrived. Such a journey would take longer than normal with a baby expected almost

any day. Life was certainly not easy for Joseph and Mary. There was probably only one large room to accommodate all the travellers. So when the baby was about to be born, the only private place was in the stable attached to the inn.

2. The Greatest Announcement

The Shepherds' Privilege

We often find birth announcements in local and national newspapers. It is interesting to read the names of the new born babies. Sometimes we are able to recognise a celebrity or member of the royal family and occasionally someone we know. For Joseph and Mary, I suppose there was no equivalent means of birth announcement and, being far from their home, there may have been no close family members to gather and rejoice at the birth. But, in the following few verses we are told that an angel of the Lord visited shepherds outside the town of Bethlehem. It was a fearful sight as the angel was accompanied by the bright shining of the Lord's glory. The field was lit up as the angel delivered his message, *"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"* (Luke 2:10-12, New International Version). Here was a birth announcement which cannot be equalled, an angel of the Lord delivering such great news.

What a contrast, the most important Person in the universe, described as *"a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord"* and where is He found? - *"in a manger"*! There was no posh palace with servants on hand. No royal family welcome. God thought it fit to bring shepherds first into this amazing secret concerning the birth of *"... the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"*, (John 10:11, New International Version). In Luke 2:15-18 (New International Version) we read, *"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."* So the shepherds responded to the invitation: they came, they saw and they spread around this wonderful news to others.

The Law Required

This day is a reminder that 2,000 years ago the Son of God took upon Himself manhood and was born as a Babe in a stable at Bethlehem. The Creator of the universe looked like a helpless baby, becoming man to experience what it was to be a person living in this world. We know that there was a purpose to His coming in this way - it was Calvary. All Jewish boys are circumcised at eight days old (see Leviticus 12:3) and at forty days after His birth Mary and Joseph with Jesus go to the temple to make an appropriate offering as commanded in the law (see Leviticus 12:6-8). We see that Joseph and Mary were not well off as they offer two pigeons as a thanksgiving sacrifice. This was the minimum that could be offered as a sacrifice. For the full story of the events in the temple read Luke 2:19-40. This might have been a quiet affair in the temple with so many other sacrifices happening. But once again God is going to make sure that this event would be noticed by two godly people. Simeon, and then Anna, come into the temple at just the right moment. Simeon was expecting this event, the birth of the Messiah. Let us read without comment from Luke 2:27-33 (New King James Version), *"So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he 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.' And Joseph and His mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of Him."* It is recorded of Anna in Luke 2:38 (New King James Version) that *"Coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem."* Both Simeon and Anna had the wonderful privilege of giving thanks upon seeing the new born Babe and recognising who He is. This is the message for today; do you recognise who He is?

3. The Greatest Person

The Wise Men

We need to turn back to Matthew to consider the wise men as they follow a specific star in order to bring gifts to the greatest Person ever born, the One who was born King. The wise men make the natural assumption that this majestic, yet unusual, event of a King being born would be found in the palace of the capital city. But it was not so. King Herod pretends to be friendly, but all Jerusalem are troubled by the news that the wise men bring. However, the religious leaders are able to explain where this special Person would be born. It is amazing that star gazing strangers from the East detect this event when God's own people miss it entirely! Had these strangers some understanding of Biblical prophecy? The wise men are given directions to Bethlehem according to the prophecy in Micah 5:2-5. Micah clearly declares the place where the Messiah would be born, Bethlehem. Once again the star appears and leads them the

final miles to Bethlehem and to the very house where Jesus is now staying with Joseph and Mary. Here they come face to face with the child Jesus and they bow and worship Him.

Let us read Matthew 2:11 (New International Version), “*On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*”

The wise men bring three different gifts, gold, incense and myrrh. These gifts were very valuable commodities. We are not told the quantity of each gift but the gifts are worthy presents for so great a King. Many expositors of Scripture see in the gifts the following features:

- **Gold**, the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ;
- **Incense (or frankincense)**, the perfection of the sinless man who always pleased the Father in His life in this world;
- **Myrrh**, the One who suffered as the sin offering on the cross.

As we meditate on the gifts and the Person to whom they are given do we not grow in our appreciation of so great a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ? So great, yet He became so low that we might be made rich through trusting Him as our Saviour!

To Conclude

We cannot consider the birth of Christ without being reminded by the myrrh of the reason why He came. The Babe of the manger became the Man of the cross.

Let me finish with the following hymn by Charles Wesley, as once again I wish all listeners a very happy Christmas and that each may know the Christ of Christmas, God’s greatest gift.

*Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new born King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.”
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”*

*Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold Him come,
Offspring of a virgin’s womb!
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.*

*Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.*

Thank you for listening to “*Truth for Today*”.

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