

The wonder of Christ's birth

Erlo Stegen:

Summary of sermon by Erlo Stegen, 28 Dec 2014

Luke 2:1-19

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 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. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 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.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

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."

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

The Christmas event shook everyone on earth, in heaven and even in hell. When Adam and Eve sinned they were expelled from the garden and cherubims with flaming swords were placed to prevent them from entering again. Now in our text, it says the angels came to the shepherds. So though the angels stopped anybody from entering into paradise, now it was the angels who brought the glad tidings that anyone can enter into glory through the birth of the Saviour. Do you see the awesome wonder of Christmas! God opening this gate that was closed.

Though we give each other gifts at Christmas they fade into insignificance in comparison to that which we received from God at Christmas.

In 1962, Rev Don and Carol Richardson, went as missionaries to New Guinea, where many cannibals were. (Even in Africa there were many cannibals. The word South in Zulu (iNingizimu) literally means, there where many cannibals are.) In 1962 there were still many cannibals in New Guinea. They regarded human flesh as the number one delicacy. Don and Carol Richardson preached the Gospel to the Sawi, a cannibal tribe. They were head-hunters, using skulls as pillows. Don wrote a book called, Peace Child. He took the Gospel of Matthew and read it to them and tried to explain it. But when he got to the story of Judas Iscariot betraying the Lord Jesus, they all clapped their hands and cheered Judas's betrayal of Jesus. Judas was their hero. He asked them why? They said that Judas was cunning to have outwitted Jesus, which is regarded as something great among them if you can befriend an enemy and eventually when he fully trusts you, betray him. Their whole cultural frame of reference was warped. Don wondered how to reach these people with the Gospel. To them betrayal was true heroism! He asked the Lord for wisdom how to reach them with the Gospel in a way that they could grasp its meaning.

The tribes there were in continual warfare. But then one day he observed that after a certain battle the chief of the one tribe went to the other tribe with his own son and gave him to them. Don asked them about this custom. They explained that the son was the peace child between the two tribes, for the one chief was willing to

sacrifice his own son to the enemy to obtain peace between the two tribes. Then it dawned on Don that he now had a cultural reference and he thanked God for the answer. He took this custom and told them that just as they were at war and the peace child brought peace, so God the Father gave his Son as the Peace Child for the rebellious sons of men to bring about peace between mankind and Him. Then they understood and realised how evil the betrayal of Judas was. God gave His own Son as the Peace Child between God and man. That is the heart of the Gospel. This is the wonder of Christmas.

Rulers of the earth like to know how many people they rule over and that's why Ceasar Augustus wanted to count the people. It wasn't just a census of people but also of their property, whatever they owned, because kings like to tax people for their possessions too. On the one hand it is understandable and good, for there needs to be infrastructure in a country, which is built with tax money. But on the other hand when there is corruption and the rulers put it in their own pockets, it is evil.

By the time of the census Mary was expecting and she was close to giving birth. But they had to go to their home town for it was decreed in Ceasar's edict, and disobedience would not be tolerated by the Romans. Mary and Joseph had to travel far to reach Bethlehem. It was especially difficult because of Mary being far into her pregnancy.

Caesar Augustus was a pagan. He knew nothing of the Word of God and of the Scriptures. However, from his desk, there was a decree signed by him that every single person in the empire was to be counted. Even the Jews, and those in Israel, had to go back to the town of their birth. So Mary and Joseph had to return to their town of birth, Bethlehem. It was far away, 20 - 25 hours of walking. There was no way out for them. They had to obey this law and go to Bethlehem. There were no taxis back then. They had to go on foot, up and down hills and valleys. The people of the day complained about the terrible decree. They looked at it from a human point of view and not from God's point of view. But God ordained it, for the Child Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem, not in Nazareth, as is written in Micah 5:3, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem, otherwise the scriptures would not be fulfilled. They traveled this long distance till they arrived there. But once they arrived there, they were told that there was no accommodation. Why did they not find accommodation? Humanly speaking it's because there were too many people. But remember that Mary and Joseph were extremely poor. And so when Mary came in her condition, they were turned away, for they were regarded as low-caste, as nobodys. And they were given a lowly place, a stable, with the animals. Had they arrived with royal looking, white horses and a whole security entourage, they would have been welcomed and room would have been found for them. But they did not arrive in pomp and so they had to accept the lowliest of places.

James writes in his letter that it should not be that when a poor person arrives and they give him a lowly place, but when a rich person arrives they give him the best place (James 2:1-4).

Remember that Caesar Augustus, the king of the world, stayed in a royal palace, but for the King of kings, no place was found to stay.

But this didn't trouble Mary and Joseph for they had a heavenly vision and their lowly place was royal to them. A person of the world seeks the things of the world and thinks they can only be satisfied with the things of the world, but a person of heaven seeks the things of heaven and is satisfied and contented with the things of heaven.

Mary and Joseph were not troubled by their surroundings, but were overjoyed for they gazed upon this Child, their Saviour and God, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

It's written that when God was in His temple, it was filled with His glory and the angels cried, "Holy, holy holy" (Is 6:1-3). He is Lord of lords and King of kings. Yet He humbled Himself to be born in a stable with animals, for you and me. And Mary and Joseph were happy with God's provision. They were perfectly content, for they had the Lord Jesus. The same is true with us too, that if we have Jesus in our hearts we will be perfectly content.

But we people tend to get things back to front, and try to find contentment in the things of the world.

There is perfect contentment with the one who has Jesus, whether he is recognised or not, whether he has

position or not. Things change when you have Jesus. All your pride vanishes. The thoughts of yourself and your own satisfaction vanishes and you are satisfied with Him.

We've looked at Rome and Bethlehem. Let's look at heaven. When Jesus was born, all of heaven was shaken with wonder and astonishment. The myriads of angels said, "let's go to earth to see this thing", and they went down as the host of heaven to see God becoming man. I don't know if there was even a single angel left in heaven. But these angels descended for they wanted to be there where Jesus was. This host of angels appeared to the shepherds and they were terror struck, seeing the host of angels singing God's praises.

The owners of the sheep were in their homes. The shepherds were probably looking after the sheep as labourers. These lowly shepherds were the ones who had the privilege of seeing the hosts of heaven declaring this wonderful news. The last shall be the first and the first last (Matt 20:16).

Though these shepherds were so afraid the angels told them not to fear, "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 Savior 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."

(A stranger came to a certain preacher, and told him that he didn't appreciate his sermons. He said he was tired of hearing him always preach about the cross, death and crucifixion of Jesus. Why not speak about Him as the good teacher and our great example. The preacher asked him if he would obey Jesus as teacher and example. The man agreed. He then told him that Jesus never sinned. Will he obey and imitate that? The man answered that it's impossible for we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). He then told him that that is why he speaks about Jesus' death, crucifixion and the cross. For He must be our Saviour too, to save us from our sins (Matt 1:21). He is not just a good teacher and great example to follow, but He is our Saviour, Shepherd, Lord and King.

This preacher spoke wisely to the man. Don't just listen to any advice people give you otherwise you will do foolish things as the following story illustrates.

A certain man walked with his grandson and a donkey. He rode on the donkey while his grandson walked beside them. Someone walking by remarked, "What a selfish old man to make the boy walk while you ride on the donkey". So he got off the donkey and placed his grandson on the donkey and they rode further. A little while later, someone else saw them and remarked, "What a cheeky little boy to ride on the donkey while the old man has to walk!". So the grandfather put his grandson with him on the donkey. Then another passerby remarked: How cruel. Have you no feelings for the poor donkey. Eventually they both got off the donkey and they carried the donkey!

The shepherds were privileged indeed to hear the host of heaven declare these glad tidings to them! One day we too will hear this heavenly host. Blessed are those who die in the Lord (Rev 14:13).

When the shepherds heard the good news they said one to another, "come let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that's been told us". They didn't go slowly but went with haste. They were not like the Pharisees and Scribes and Sadducees in Jerusalem who, when Herod called them, told him that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Yet not one of them took a step to actually go to the place where Jesus was born! What does that mean? They were only like a sign board next to the road, pointing the way but never going itself. Many people are like that. They know the truth and can tell others the truth, but they don't apply it to their own lives!

But the shepherds went with haste as quickly as possible to see the Christ Child born in Bethlehem. For your own salvation's sake, don't only point the way like a signboard but go to Christ yourself.

Then lastly, the shepherds, after seeing the Christ Child exactly as the angels had told them, went to everyone to proclaim what they had witnessed. There is a world out there that needs the Gospel. Are you busy proclaiming the wonder of Christmas and that there is salvation and a way opened into paradise?