

Luke chapter 2:1 to 20, 8.0 am Christmas day

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
Amen.

Today we celebrate Jesus' birthday and in chapter 1 of St Luke's gospel we are told the precise details of his birth.

Now to Luke this was vital that people understood that Jesus was born to an ordinary woman in an ordinary way, because by the time of St Luke some people were already beginning to think that Jesus, because of the miraculous signs and other things he did, that Jesus wasn't human, but only seemed to be human, and that his humanity was some sort of an illusion.

To make it clear at the onset that Jesus was truly human both St Luke and St Matthew recorded the events of Jesus' birth, and while in the 2nd or 3rd centuries there may have been a denial of Jesus' humanity it soon passed; Jesus' humanity is beyond doubt and is the rock on which the whole events of the cross, resurrection and ascension depends,

Now at the beginning of chapter 2, St Luke reinforces his message of the humanity of Jesus by relating the details of the date and circumstances of Jesus' birth to the other important events which were going on at the same time.

It was a time, for example, when Emperor Augustus sent out a decree telling all the people's of Rome and of the Roman Empire to register in their home town, and this was undertaken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Emperor Augustus controlled the Roman Empire from 27 BC to 14 AD. He was a great builder, building roads and rebuilding Rome, he also set up a police force and a firefighting service but all this of course required a lot of money, hence the census.

The census was to bring in all those people in the empire who were yet unknown to the tax man so that he could finance all his schemes, and probably increase his own personal wealth at the same time, he was after all a dictator.

The fact that people like Mary could have lost her baby on the journey she had to make wouldn't have worried an emperor, certainly not Augustus.

And there would also have been those like Joseph and Mary who had to leave all their belongings at home while they went to their home towns, which would also have had it's problems.

However it did lead to Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, thus fulfilling the prophesy that the Messiah would come from David's town of Bethlehem.

At first reading it would seem that Augustus was in control of people's destiny, but that may not have been the case.

Had not the Emperor insisted on a census then Jesus would not have been born in Bethlehem, so despite what Augustus may have thought, it was God who was always in control, because it was God who wanted his Messiah to be born in Bethlehem.

It is also clear from Luke's account that the birth of Jesus was not a grand affair, but a very humble one.

It started with Joseph, and a very pregnant Mary, having to undertake a very arduous journey from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, a distance of about 90 miles on foot and riding a donkey, a journey taking possibly 7 days or more.

And after that very exhausting journey, having no where comfortable to stay let alone where she could give birth to a baby and in the end they had to settle for a stable.

This was of course because so many people, like them, had to return to register, and clearly they were among the last to arrive, which taking into account Mary's condition wasn't surprising.

And we are told that when Jesus was born all Mary had to wrap Jesus up in was some spare cloth which may well have been torn from one of their own garments that they were not wearing at the time, and then laying him in a manger.

Verse 4 is significant, Luke writes, "Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem because he was descended from the house and family of David".

St Luke takes pains to tell us that Joseph is David's descendent, therefore Jesus being Joseph's son by adoption, with all the rights and privileges of a son, is also a descendent of king David.

As a true and abiding heir of king David, Jesus fulfils God's plan that the house of David would reign for ever, see 2 Samuel, 7: 12 to 16, and Psalm 132:11.

We are then told that it was night and that there were shepherds nearby looking after their sheep when an angel of the Lord stood in front of them bringing with them the glory of the Lord which shone all around them, and not surprising they were terrified, one minute in virtual darkness the next in bright light.

But the angel told them not to be afraid, and he then told them of the good news of great joy of the birth of Jesus, God's Messiah.

The theme of a humble start is continued here, because shepherds were considered the least among the people of Israel, but it was to them that the angels gave the good news.

Shepherds were despised, mainly because of the demands of their sheep which meant they were seldom at home looking after their families, and in the main they were uneducated and lived rough.

However it was to the least in Israel that the angel gave the good news of great joy of the birth of Jesus.

Because if the good news of Christ doesn't first and foremost bring great joy to our hearts, then we don't fully understand the good news.

Because the good news is that through faith in Christ, death for us is merely the gateway to heaven, to a paradise where death is no more, where the joy of living will make this place seem like hell in comparison.

The angels brought good news, but more importantly they brought great joy to those shepherds, so much so that they did something they had never done before in their lives, they abandoned their sheep and went to have a look, but before they went there suddenly appeared a great army of heaven's angels singing praises to God.

When the angels went away they left their sheep and set off for the town of Bethlehem and there they found Joseph and Mary and saw the baby lying in the manger, and it was then that they told Mary and Joseph what had happened in the fields while tending to their sheep.

Verse 18 reads, "All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said." That I found interesting because I had always made the assumption that Mary and Joseph were alone in the stable with Jesus but apparently they weren't.

They may not have been the only ones who couldn't find a place to stay that night, or perhaps some people had come in to give Mary and Joseph help at the birth of Jesus, after all neither of them had any experience of child birth before.

Now although we are told that Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The fact that Mary did doesn't mean that all the others didn't, I'm sure they did, because it was such an extraordinary thing to have happened.

And then the shepherds returned to their sheep glorifying God because they had looked into the eyes of a two-year-old little boy, and had seen infinite love, and the very image of God;, and I'm sure somewhat confused as to what it all meant for the future.

But they had a taste of the joy of knowing Jesus, a joy which we share with them, a joy which I'm sure we all treasure above all things.

As we sit let us pray,

You came, Lord Jesus, to teach us the way of life that you require, to show us how we are to serve you and our neighbours; make us receptive to your teaching and to your gospel, and help us to live a life of service to you, without counting the cost, to the glory of your name.

Amen