

Christmas Homily 2018

What was it about this child that drove the shepherds to go and have a quick look and then tell all their mates?

What were all the people amazed at? After all, the birth of every baby is amazing, even though some of us might think: 😊 – “Seen one baby, seen them all”. What were they amazed at?

And what did Mary treasure up and ponder in her heart? After all, it goes without saying that every new mother (unless dreadful depression affects her) will usually do the same thing.

Here are some Christmas puzzles for us as hearers of the well-loved story.

But it's not just the people living 2 millennia ago in Israel on the other side of the world among whom this birth caused such a stir. No, this very day as the globe spins on its axis billions of people will remember this baby in some way.

I'm sorry to tell you they won't remember your birthday; they certainly won't remember mine.

So why this baby and his birth?

Let's see what gospel writer Luke has to say.

Because we may be very familiar with the story and perhaps stumble a bit when we try to read its beginning out loud (!), we might easily miss the first point Luke makes. That is,

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1. The record of this birth is as good history as possible.

We know Luke was a doctor, a man of science. What we may not know is that in the way he wrote about Jesus Luke changed the way we do history. At the beginning of our gospel passage today he anchors what he's telling us in time and space. Usually up to this point historians mixed up historical events and mythology – and made no real distinction. But Luke is different. He sticks to the facts. Historical facts about a world-wide census under Caesar Augustus which we can check. The impact of that census on a backwater of the Roman Empire, Israel, which we can check. That he's checked and the name of Joseph Davidson (!) is there in the census records for the village of Bethlehem in Judea in what we know is 4BC.

He's been a fact-checker himself and he's happy for us to do that as well. For him, and many great and scholarly historians right down from then to the present day agree that what he's telling us actually is historically true.

1. The record of this birth is as good history as possible.

So what is Luke telling us, and why?

2. THIS birth gets its meaning directly from God.

The stage is set for a divine encounter:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

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Terrified? I would be too. In all of human history hardly more than a handful of people are exposed to the glory of God. What's more, the history of those to whom God does reveal his glory makes us feel very reticent to want Him to appear to us. People are either overcome with a deep sense of shame, like Isaiah the prophet; or unable to lift up their eyes and actually see God's glory, like God's friend Moses; or they are struck dead for daring to reach out and touch it, like the Israelites receiving the ark of God back from the Philistines.

Yet these men are surrounded by the glory of God, and they see a messenger from God. And down through the halls of heaven onto a well-grazed Judean hillside comes the unmistakable announcement from God about this birth:

The angel said to them, "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 Saviour 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."

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

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

And what is it about this baby they will find that causes such angelic praise of God? (By the way – let's realize this was probably deafening and the heavenly crowd was probably uncountable. It's meant to grab attention. This is A BIG DEAL!)

For this baby, says God through the angel, is unique.

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He is the saviour, the rescuer of his people. In this case, not a rescuer from Egypt, like Moses had been 1300 years before; not a rescuer/judge from their enemies as Samuel and the preceding judges had been; not a rescuer warrior like Joshua or even David, all of whom rescued God's peoples from their military enemies.

But THIS saviour is to rescue God's people from God's righteous judgement against our refusal to have him as our Lord, our boss, our only God. He will save God's people from their sin.

He is the Messiah, the Christ (same meaning), or the true and only king of humankind. The one to whom, as Psalm 2 teaches us, God has given not just the Jews but all the nations as his inheritance. The one to whom absolute loyalty and allegiance must be given by all humans.

And he is the Lord – he is God!

Saviour; Christ (Messiah); God. All truths we now recite about this baby each week in the creed. Glorious truths. Unique truths. Truths addressed to all humankind.

But truths whose impact on those who bow to him is this:

Peace.

True peace, Luke tells us. Peace not just with each other, but much more importantly, with God himself.

This birth is of the one promised since the book of Genesis who will –as we know in his own death and resurrection – bring trusting humans back into that sweet friendship with God that Adam and Eve threw away in the Garden.

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Who will, as we are reminded in the Communion, reconcile the holy God with believing but definitely unholy humans. Who will stand in our place and receive the just desserts of our sin so that we may go free!

2. THIS birth gets its meaning directly from God

The third point Luke makes to us is this:

3. THIS birth changes everything.

We read how it changed the lives of the shepherds: - they went, and then they told

How it changed things for their neighbours and townsfolk; they were stunned, amazed!

And how it changed things for Mary; who stored these truths about her newborn son in the very core of her being.

But the reason WE are hearing of it 2 millennia later and on the other side of the world in a country none of them could ever imagine is that THIS birth changed everything for the whole world.

There is no other way peace can come than in the way it has come through Jesus making peace between humans and God by his death on the cross.

So, is he your Saviour?

Is he your King?

Is he your God?

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That's the point! Acknowledge him in all his completely human and completely divine glory and because of his completely selfless actions for us – and you will know peace with God; mercy, forgiveness and pardon.