

Luke 2:22-40

When Luke began to research the details surrounding Jesus' birth, even he must have been surprised at the supernatural events that occurred. There was the Angel of the Lord announcing John's birth to the old priestly couple. There was the further appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary announcing Jesus' birth to her. There was another appearance by this angel to the shepherds in the Bethlehem fields. Then finally the Angel was joined by a vast army of heavenly beings glorifying God and proclaiming peace to people with whom God is pleased. No wonder Luke records that Mary "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart". But more was to follow.

We shall look at the setting of these events and then the announcements made by two people.

The infant Jesus was presented at the Temple.

Mary and Joseph was a pious couple in the very best sense of the word. At the end of eight days Jesus was circumcised in obedience to the Law of Moses. At this time, according to contemporary custom, he was named Jesus which means the "Lord is Salvation". This was in accordance with what Gabriel had told Mary when announcing to her the news of her miraculous conception. At this point he had told her Jesus was to be his name.

The next rite to be performed was the purification. The Law required that Mary and Jesus, according to Leviticus, were to be purified and after forty days, the period required for a male child, Jesus was to be presented at the Temple.

Luke 2:22-40

At the presentation Jesus was a first-born child and thus was to be called “holy to the Lord”. According to Mosaic Law Israel was to remember they were God’s people who had been saved from slavery in Egypt by the Angel of the Lord passing over the Jewish households. A lamb had to be slain and its blood was daubed on the door posts and lintels. Mary and Joseph were to bring a sacrifice to the temple but being poor were permitted to sacrifice “a pair of turtle doves, or two young pigeons” instead of a lamb. This was according to Exodus 13. The child belonged to the Lord and was to be redeemed.

Luke is beginning to make two things clear and he will consistently emphasise these themes throughout his writings in both his Gospel and Acts. The first theme Luke emphasises is that Jesus came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets and that he did this perfectly in every respect. Even in his infancy he fulfils them through his parent’s piety. The apostle Paul, to whom Luke had been a dear friend and doctor had summed it up in this way, “but when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Gal 4:4-5).

Luke 2:22-40

A second theme the Evangelist underlines is that the poor have a special place in God's salvation and that Jesus himself was constantly identifying himself with this class. Luke records from Mary's song that the Lord "has looked on the humble estate of his servant" when he chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus. This had been God's practice for from generation to generation "he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away".

The Infant Jesus was the subject of Prophecy

The first prophecy is delivered by Simeon. He was an upright man and very devout. He lived in Jerusalem and longed for God's comforting his people Israel. What distress the nation had endured! It had suffered under foreign armies with latterly the Greeks and then Romans invading the country. The voice of the true prophet had not been heard for centuries. Simeon was among the faithful few who pleaded for God to intervene and save by his promised Christ, God's anointed King.

Luke 2:22-40

God had heard his prayers and like Zachariah, Elizabeth and John the Holy Spirit had come upon him. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would see the Lord's promised Christ before he died. With Mary and Joseph entering the Temple with their child the day of fulfilment had arrived. Inspired by the Spirit he entered the Temple and took the child Jesus from Mary and praising God he burst into a prophetic psalm. He prayed that God would allow him to die, for in seeing this child he had seen God's salvation for which he had so desperately prayed and longed. He could now die in peace. He had seen the Saviour. This would be THE Saviour, the Saviour not only of Israel but also of all the nations.

The parents were astonished at what Simeon said about their child. It seems they must have been in a state of constant astonishment with the angel of the Lord, the heavenly host, the shepherds and Spirit-inspired people like Elisabeth, Zechariah and now Simeon making astounding claims for Jesus. They were still trying to comprehend the enormous significance of his birth. They were trying to understand what really is impossible to understand. It was the good news from God that this world needed then and has always needed in our desperate plight.

Luke 2:22-40

Good news it is but it is sad news as well! Simeon made this clear. As a result of this child's ministry there will be great trauma. Some will embrace his word of truth and compassion and others will vehemently reject it. It will expose and judge the intent and loyalties of the hearts of men and women who hear him. He will become the centre and object of great debate. Some will be hostile toward him and say that he is mad and a servant of the devil. Others will love him with their lives and understand he is from, and is God, and will die for him. Some will be elevated and others will be devastated by his work.

In this there was a special word for Mary who would observe his earthly ministry which will end in rejection by the Jewish religious leadership and a resulting humiliating and shameful crucifixion. It will be like a sword through her heart.

But then there was a second prophecy. This time by the 84-year-old Anna. She was well known around the Temple and may even have had a room there. She worshiped God day and night with fasting and prayer. She praised God for the child and told anyone whose attention she could get that here in this child was the redemption of Jerusalem.

Conclusion

And how shall we respond to Luke's gospel at the end of this year. We could well follow the example of Mary and keep all these things and ponder them in our heart in the New Year, and determine that we match the ponderings with a new life in accordance with God's revelation in Jesus.