

The Humility of Christmas

Luke 2:8-20 Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹ "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" ¹⁵ ¶ So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷ Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. ¹⁸ And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

Shortly before midnight on November 14, 1948, Buckingham Palace announced that Princess Elizabeth had given birth to her first child, a son. Within the hour, his arrival was cabled across the Empire and the Commonwealth, where church bells were rung and Union Jacks raised in his honour. Across the globe, British warships fired a birthday salute.

We could multiply other examples. Royal births are greeted with fanfare, pomp and display. When a king's heir is born, it is a chance to publicly flex the royal muscles, and celebrate the permanence of the king's reign. It is a king's way of saying, I am here to stay, and my son will reign in my place. My line is secure, my posterity safe, and my name will continue.

Royal births are big political events, where the might and wealth and splendour of a ruler are celebrated. Military parades, gun salutes, lavish feasts. The nobility, the educated, wealthy upper classes are first told, and after the upper crust has been told, word spreads down to the middle and lower classes of society that a prince has been born.

If someone of great importance has been born, the first people a king tells are other people of great importance – other kings, other rulers, nobles, dukes, princes, judges, barons, lords. You send them special personalised announcements, and they, in turn, send royal gifts, and best wishes. They attend special parties you hold to celebrate the birth of your son, and everyone glories in the pomp and splendour of being amongst the royal, rich and gifted of the world.

So, if someone with no knowledge of God or the Bible were to write a fictional story about the birth of God's Son, taking into consideration what you've just heard about royal births, how would he write it? All you know is earthly kings, and how they announce the birth of their sons. You know that this is now the most important birth ever. This is the son of the High king. He will be the King of the kings. He will rule not a locality, a region, or a city. He will rule the whole earth. Now, this eternal, everlasting God the Son, has mysteriously added to Himself a true human nature, and has been born.

First, to which maiden will He be born - naturally, a young lady from the royal court, or at least, one of the high priestly families. Second, in what circumstances should He be born - ideally, in the palace of the High Priest, with priests awaiting to ritually cleanse and pray prayers of kingly dedication over him, before being wrapped in the finest linen and placed into His silk sheets in His

golden and jewel-encrusted cot. Third, who should hear the announcement first? Well, the noblemen of Israel; the priests and rulers; the Pharisees and rabbis; the royal court of Herod; the chief families of Jerusalem. They much each receive a personalised invitation to come to the palace and pay respects.

Were the Bible merely the devising of human imagination, that's exactly what it would say. When the King of Kings is born, you take all the pomp and splendour of other royal births and multiply it by 10. But what do we find?

The mother is to be a poor young lady from an obscure town in Galilee, far from Jerusalem, a town called Nazareth, a small hamlet with about 50 houses. She lives in disgrace, ever since she has been found pregnant, but still unmarried. The suspected father, Joseph, nevertheless marries her, and goes off to be counted in a census. They end up in Bethlehem, not intending to stay, purely there as travellers - travellers who find the place overcrowded and full, and no one apparently having enough compassion to give a pregnant mother a bed to lie on. They end up in a stable, with all the stink, odour and discomfort of being a barn with animals. And there the baby comes. Probably Joseph had to deliver the baby himself, in all the unsanitary conditions of the manure and flies and dirt of a stable.

And when He is born, mystery of mysteries, a little, crying, struggling infant, who is God the Son. She wraps Him in strips of cloth. No disposable diapers here, no special wet wipes, no anti-allergenic cloth nappies, just strips of cloth to cover his shivering little body. And where does the exhausted Mary put him? In a used, rather dirty feeding trough of one of the animals.

Then, probably most importantly, who is first told of this birth? To whom does God send His own angels to sing and announce the birth of the King of Kings? You can send an angelic host to anyone, anywhere? The palace in Jerusalem is just as accessible to them as people by the Sea of Galilee. Space or distance isn't a problem. But to whom does He send them?

After centuries of waiting and praying and seeking for Messiah to come, who gets to hear the message first? The chief priests? The Sanhedrin? The house of Herod? The nobility in Jerusalem? The rich in Galilee? No. Shepherds, nameless, anonymous shepherds. A few shepherds keeping night watch over their flocks in the pastures near Bethlehem. And what social status did shepherds occupy in Israel? Shepherding was considered menial work for the uneducated. And you can understand why. You literally live with animals for days, weeks on end. No place to wash and spray yourself; day after day in the baking sun, sleeping on the hard ground. Shepherds no doubt looked like people who are in the sun all day, and sleep on the ground, and don't get to shave very often.

Just like in our culture, there are certain jobs we don't aspire for our children to have; I sincerely doubt parents in Israel wanted their children to be shepherds. When they were, it was often because they were the youngest. Remember David? Remember how his older brother taunted him about being a shepherd when he came to see the battle:

1 Samuel 17:28 "Why did you come down here? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness?"

Now this is something we really ought to stop and question? Why, if God intends to save the world, would He announce the most important birth of all time to an anonymous group of illiterate shepherds on an obscure hillside in Judea? If Messiah were to be born in our era today, it would be like appearing to some street sweepers or pavement vendors, some rubbish collectors or people collecting plastic, or metal to recycle. Why would God choose the lowest folk to tell first the news of the highest birth?

I think there are two important answers to that question.

Why would God choose to announce the birth of His Son first to shepherds?

The first answer is this:

Because the Message of Jesus' coming is for the Humble

Jesus' birth is the first part of His whole life. He came not to simply give us an example. He came to die, and to die for the sins of the world. This message of Him coming to the world to die for us, is not a message for the self-sufficient. It's not a message for the self-righteous. It's not a message for the ones who are upright and moral in their own eyes.

Jesus once told the Pharisees:

Mark 2:17 ⁷ *When Jesus heard it, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."*

That's interesting, because Romans 3:10 says, *there is no one righteous, no, not one.*

In other words, Jesus was not saying to the Pharisees, "You're righteous, so you're exempt from my call to repentance." No, He was saying, "You are righteous in your own eyes, and therefore you exempt yourself from my offer of forgiveness." The Pharisees were sinners; in fact, in many ways, more so than the others, but they did not see themselves so. And just like you cannot convince a man who thinks he's healthy to go to the doctor, so you cannot convince a man inflated with his own religious pride that He needs a Saviour.

On another occasion, Jesus rejoiced at the paradox of how the simple, unlearned will understand, while the scholarly and brilliant will not.

Luke 10:21 ¶ *In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight."*

The humbling message of Christmas is that we all need a Saviour. So God announces this news to the people most humble in terms of social standing – shepherds, simple, untaught, illiterate, unlearned shepherds. Because, do you know what untaught, unlearned, illiterate shepherds will do with a message that the Messiah has been born in Bethlehem? They will believe it. They will humbly accept it.

And do you know what humble people do when they hear they are sinners who need a Saviour? They believe it. That's why the message of Jesus' coming is for the humble.

The greatest enemy of our own souls is our pride. But God never works with our pride. He completely undercuts it. He must dethrone it entirely.

1 Corinthians 1:27-29 *But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.*

The message of the Gospel is one of those things that are designed to escape you if you are proud. You will walk right past, stumble right over it, because your nose is so high in the air, your chest puffed out so far. The gospel is for those who are weak and heavy laden. It is for those who have sinned. It is for those who carry a burden of guilt. It is for those who know they need help, and more than help, they need saving. It is for those who know the answer is simpler than the deepest

metaphysical papers philosophers have written. The gospel is for the childlike of heart. It is for the shepherd-like in heart.

The Bible summed this up in another place: God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. So when God bypasses the powerful, bypasses the learned, bypasses the scholars, philosophers, politicians and clergy and sends His own angels to announce to shepherds, he is making a very powerful statement. I do not play the world's game of pomp and splendour and impressing each others with gold and silver and special titles. I want to save mankind, and I intend my message to be heard by all, understood by all and believed with the kind of simplicity that the shepherds had.

The second reason why God announced this message first to shepherds brings us to the very heart of God.

When God made the world, He got to make not only a home on which humanity could live, but a place which was flooded with images and pictures that would help us to understand Him. And so amongst all the things God creates, He makes sheep. Sheep – not fast enough to be raced, not strong enough to be ridden or used to pull ploughs. Not aggressive enough to be protectors. Rather unintelligent animals. Like this story illustrates:

“Hundreds of sheep followed their leader off a cliff in eastern Turkey, plunging to their deaths this week while shepherds looked on in dismay. Four hundred sheep fell 15 metres to their deaths in a ravine in Van province near Iran but broke the fall of another 1,100 animals who survived, newspaper reports said yesterday. Shepherds from Ikizler village neglected the flock while eating breakfast, leaving the sheep to roam free, the Radikal daily said. The loss to local farmers was estimated at \$74,000.”

Unintelligent animals, unable to properly protect themselves, creatures that Darwinistic evolution should have killed off long ago, were the natural selection, a purely undirected, impersonal force in the universe. Sheep are made to have human shepherds; shepherds that protect them, lead them, take them to green pastures and good waters; shepherds that fight off predators. In return, the shepherds get warm wool, and meat.

So when God makes the world, He makes these animals, and sets up a situation so that as far back as man can remember, there have been shepherds looking after sheep. It's an image imprinted on almost every culture's mind.

And then, lo and behold what God begins to compare Himself to? He tells Israel

Isaiah 40:11 He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young.

Psalms 80:1 To the Chief Musician. Set to "The Lillies." A Testimony of Asaph. A Psalm. Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock; You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth!

Ezekiel 34:31 "You are My flock, the flock of My pasture; you are men, and I am your God," says the Lord GOD.

The well-beloved Psalm 23 is an extended metaphor – God is the Shepherd, and humans are now the sheep.

In the Old and New Testament, God refers to those who lead his people as shepherds. Jesus is referred to as the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd, and the Chief Shepherd.

Why do you think God loves this metaphor so much? The answer is also the second reason why God announced the birth of His Son to shepherds first of all:

Because God is a Shepherd at Heart.

God loves the shepherding illustration because it is one of the best ways of illustrating how He is towards us. Here is a shepherd, a human being, who chooses to spend his time amongst the sheep. He lives with them. He feeds them. He names them, and cleans them of their parasites. He binds up broken limbs. He will risk his own human life against wild animals to protect these simple, dumb sheep. But that's the heart of God.

Here is God, the infinite, transcendent, self-sufficient God, perfect in beauty and joy and pleasure. He makes these humans, who are of a different kind to him, like sheep are to us. Yet He wants to dwell with us. He wanted to be amongst Israel in the Tabernacle. When Jesus was born, it was the ultimate statement – Emmanuel, God amongst us: I am God but I will dwell with you and amongst you. The Bible ends with God moving heaven to earth with the coming of a new heavens and new earth:

Revelation 21:3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.

God is a shepherd at heart, in that He condescends to dwell and to help a race of people bent on going their own way. The prophet Isaiah was careful to choose the metaphor when he wrote:

Isaiah 53:6 ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way;

God has always been a shepherd at heart. He is meek. He bridles His wrath and His judgement, to condescend to show mercy and grace to a race bent on walking off a cliff of destruction.

So when God first announces the birth of His Son to shepherds, He is not only saying – the message must be received humbly, He is saying, I, too am a shepherd, and so is my Son. In fact, isn't that what Jesus said of His own mission?

John 10:11-18 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. ¹² "But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ "The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. ¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. ¹⁵ "As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. ¹⁶ "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. ¹⁸ "No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."

Jesus came as a shepherd does – to seek out His sheep. To do so, He had to not only be the Shepherd who seeks, but the Lamb who dies. The interesting thing about those shepherds, who were keeping watch over their flocks by night near Bethlehem, is that they were probably raising those sheep to be sacrificed in the Temple at Jerusalem. They were probably taking care of sheep that would become sacrifices for sin.

Jesus came to be the final and ultimate sacrifice for sin. He came to take the blame for your sin and my sin. He came to face God's anger upon Himself on behalf of those who believe, so that they should never face hell. That's why Jesus says, I lay down My life for the sheep. I am both a

Shepherd who dies to protect the sheep, and I am also the ultimate Lamb, given to pay for the sins of the world.

So when He announces the birth of His Son to shepherds first of all, He is saying loud and clear, I am a Shepherd, and my Son comes to you as a Shepherd. God did not announce the birth of His Son to kings, because He didn't come the first time as a King. He came the first time as a Lamb to be slain, as one seeking and preaching and pleading. God announced the arrival of His Son to shepherds to say to the world, you do not need royal birth or riches or high pedigree to become part of my Flock. Be simple. Be humble. Come to Me and receive My Son as your forgiveness of sins, as your own Shepherd of your life. God says to the world, I am seeking you out. I am looking for the lost. I don't want you to walk off the cliff of hell. I have come to seek and to save that which was lost.

We do not celebrate the birth of our Lord as an end in itself. We celebrate His birth insofar as it brought Him here to do what He came to do: die for our sins. There is born to you in the city of David this day – a *Saviour*.

But this leaves us with a great and important choice, one far more stark than the sentimental feelings attached to tinsel and Christmas carols. The choice is: will you embrace Jesus Christ as the Lamb for your sins, and as the Shepherd of your life? Or do you celebrate His birth for the sake of other people – for those people who have accepted Him as such?

You see, by appearing to shepherds, God was also announcing mercy and clemency and grace – a time for man to come back to the fold.

His second coming will not be so. His second coming will not be in a stable in a rural town, with shepherds the first ones to know. No, that was his first coming, because He came as the Shepherd-Lamb. When He comes again, He comes as the Judge and King. Oh, He will still ever be the good and great and chief Shepherd, but He returns with the glory and power which the wise of this world were expecting the first time.

Revelation 1:7 Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him.

Why will they mourn? Many of them will mourn because it will then be too late to turn to Him. Or perhaps some of them will not want to, and will mourn because their day of self-rule is over.

All the things about the Christmas story tell us what kind of God He is and what He values. He is meek and loves to seek out the lost. He hates pride and pretence, self-righteousness and self-made religion. He comes to seek out the simple sheep-like ones. His message will be heard and understood by simple, shepherd-like people.

God humbled Himself to become a man. What a travesty, when man resists God's gift in pride. This gospel message is all about humility. Humble yourself. Admit your sin, your failure, and your wrongs against God. Admit your weakness, helplessness and inability to save yourself. Believe His provision in Jesus Christ is full, sufficient and free. Ask for it with open, empty hands. Accept it with deep gratitude and love.