

Luke 2:1-7 The visible expression of God's love

Introduction

Felicity Barkus as brought up in a Christian home in Australia and attended all the usual activities and events Christian young people engage in, but while at university her commitment to God waned. It was no rejection of her past, instead an enthusiasm for other things that crowded out God and links with a local church. In 1998 she moved to the UK with her then boyfriend, got married and had a family. In 2011, two years ago, she was invited to attend a nativity play put on by Holy Trinity, Richmond, the local parish church. From the first hymn onwards the whole Christmas story in word and action connected with her life as the Holy Spirit gently and powerfully met with her in the church that day. Her tears flowed as she started to walk out of the church. Her son's nursery teacher, a Christian and Church member, recognised her and caught up with her and was able to listen to her and pray with her. Felicity came back to the Lord as did her sister Maryann not too long after back in Australia [Good News December 2013, pp.1-2]. The love of God was grounded in the very real world of first century Judea and Galilee. The power of the Gospel message we proclaim is not merely about a distant God 'out there' who is unreachable and unmoved by our joys and sorrows, our heartaches and our fears. He is 'Emmanuel' God with us who had identified with us to the extent of being born as a baby in Bethlehem. This story is wonderful, amazing and remarkable. No adjectives in our language can begin to do it justice. It is the visible expression of God's love. It is a revelation of the father-heart of our amazing God.

Christmas communicates in our culture because it is tangible and connected to people's lives – not all though, as there are a few people even unfamiliar with the basic outline of that first Christmas. For many people outside the Christian faith the connection is vague and somehow magical, like other elements of their Christmas celebrations which provide good cheer in the midst of winter. It is our responsibility as Christians to point people to the real heart of the Christmas story of God becoming a human being in the form of a helpless baby, being born in the most spartan of circumstances in a far-flung province of the Roman Empire.

1. The Time of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:1-3)

*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 (Luke 2:1-3). Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts were written in the first instance for a friendly Roman citizen called Theophilus who wanted to know about Jesus and the Early Church and what it was they stood for and wanted to share with other people. Luke 1:1-4 gives us these details: *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye witnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.* This man was genuinely interested in finding out about the Christian faith but was probably not too familiar with either the Old Testament or Judaism. As a result Luke will endeavour to build bridges to his world by anchoring his message in the Romans world of his day. He wants to communicate clearly that he was not simply telling nice stories. On the contrary, he was communicating a series of historical events that were of world changing importance, even if it didn't seem like it at the time. Therefore in Luke 2:1-3 the author mentions the name of the reigning Emperor Caesar Augustus. Anyone who knew anything about current affairs would know that just like almost everyone in the United Kingdom would*

know that Queen Elizabeth II was the reigning monarch of our country. However, he was a distant monarch whose name was known, but of little apparent significance to daily living for the vast majority of the citizens of the empire he ruled. Things were about to change, however, as Luke will inform us shortly, but at this stage he gives this factual anchor on which Theophilus can engage with the story from a clear point of reference. Next Luke records the name of the Governor of the Province of Syria that included all of Israel down to the border with Syria; together with the countries we call Lebanon and Syria today. His name was Quirinius. He was a major figure in his day, but little information has survived of his two terms as Governor. It is, however, significant to Luke to record his name as presumably Theophilus must have known of him otherwise there was no obvious reason to include this name. This pattern of anchoring the text in the wider social and political context is repeated in Luke 3:1-2: *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene –² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* Luke then explains the life and ministry of John the Baptist and shows his connection with Jesus. His anchoring data here is even more extensive listing both a Roman Emperor and regional Roman Governor, together with names of rulers of small semi-independent kingdoms in the region. If that was not enough Luke then adds the names of the two senior religious leaders in the Jewish establishment, prior to naming John the Baptist. Luke's effect is seeking to connect the Christian faith, the Bible with the world of the one interested in his faith. Our calling today, in our own way is to do the same in showing the relevance of our faith to our daily lives and by implication to that of other people around us. The Bible and our faith is deeply relevant to the contemporary world. If it were lived out more seriously by our society then it would be a very different country than that experienced by so many people. We cannot impact the lives of vast numbers of people, but each and every one of us can make a difference in a few people's lives. This is the challenge –are we seeking to do that in Jesus' name?

2. The Place of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:4)

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. (a) **The importance of the geographical information** Luke records not only contemporary political information but also geographical knowledge that relates to the picture he is attempting to paint. He has a number of purposes here in giving this information that displays Joseph's acceptance of and response to the Emperor's order to register in his ancestral homeland for the latest census. The general rule was that they were taken every fourteen years in the Empire, but the degree to which they were carried out in more remote provinces is in question. What is clear is that during the reign of Caesar Augustus there was a more thorough registration of the population not for census purposes but to assess the possible taxation levels for that province. In all but this province and Egypt people registered at their current address. The Emperor was, though more than willing to stick with local registration customs and this is what happened in these two places. Some critics have denied such exceptions and claimed that Luke made it up. They are wrong! Luke was a meticulous historian. An actual Government edict has survived from Egypt from this era. It states:

Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt orders: 'Seeing that the time has come for the house to house census, it is necessary to compel all those, who for any cause whatsoever are residing outside their districts to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census, and may also diligently attend to the cultivation of their allotments.' [William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 15] Therefore, we have no reason to question the accuracy of the account Luke gives of Joseph's three day-

length trek, around eighty miles, to his ancestral village of Bethlehem. Joseph, a carpenter came from one of the cluster of small villages in Galilee, but although he and possibly earlier generations of his family had lived there, another place south of Jerusalem was always viewed as home. How many patriotic Scots live overseas but still see the place of their birth as home? There are quite a lot of them! How many of us today view a place as ‘home’ that is different from our current location? The facts of where these events took place was important to Luke as this is an extraordinary human story that Theophilus needs to hear about and then come to terms with the significance of who Jesus really is and why He came to earth. However, the geography was only part of the story as there is something much more amazing that ties in with it. (b) **The significance of fulfilled prophecy** Luke and indeed the other Gospel writers wanted to point their readers to the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament which contained amazing information that pointed forward to the significance of Jesus’ coming. In Isaiah 9:1-2, in a context of much ‘gloom and doom’ about the future prospects of their country, the prophet indicates that there will be a notable event taking place in Galilee. He describes it in these words: *Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan –² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.* Galilee was a place where ‘nothing significant happened’. It was viewed as a backwater that those who wanted to get on in life left. It may be where you came from but not a place where you might desire to be. Certainly no-one worth getting to know would admit to a home address in Nazareth! This was seen so clearly in the exchange recorded in John’s Gospel where an early disciple of Jesus called Philip seeks to persuade his friend Nathanael to follow Jesus also. John 1:45-46 states: ⁴⁵ *Philip found Nathanael and told him, ‘We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’* ⁴⁶ *‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’ Nathanael asked. ‘Come and see,’ said Philip.* Yet why was it important to Luke to stress that Joseph went to register for the census in the village of Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem? This relates to a prophecy by a contemporary prophet in the eighth century BC Micah whose work was undertaken at the same time as Isaiah. He wrote: *‘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 days of eternity.’* (Micah 5:2). In much of the empire only the head of the household was required to attend in person to register his family. Therefore, again some critics questioned the fact that Mary and Joseph, two teenagers were both required to make the long journey, not least when she was heavily pregnant and in a less than ideal position for an arduous journey without the support of the women in her family to assist in the delivery of the baby. Yet once again the critics are wrong. In these two provinces both the husband and the wife were required to present themselves in person to register for the census. In Egypt as in neighbouring Israel and Syria couples came together to complete this administrative process [W. Hendriksen, *Luke*, p. 142]. The geographical data concerning this family fitted in so well with the prophetic utterances about the birth of a special person made more than seven centuries before the birth. Under all normal circumstances published information about a birth is written after the baby has arrived safely. Yet unlike Matthew who wrote his Gospel for a Jewish audience, Luke doesn’t highlight the links with the Old Testament, because Theophilus is unfamiliar with it and almost certainly would have no access to it. He would have to take Luke’s word regarding the accuracy of his sources, which is why the assurance was given at the start concerning the care Luke took to obtain this information from reliable witnesses. Yet for us looking back – a question is posed who is it that has information recorded centuries before their birth? Did God have a hand in this in a special way? At this stage from the information provided it is not totally clear but as the rest of Luke 2 unfolds,

following on from the extraordinary encounters with the Angel Gabriel in Luke 1, it is extremely difficult to deny that one of the most incredible events in human history has taken place.

3. **The Family into which Jesus was born** (Luke 2:5)

⁵ *He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.* In that culture and religious context where life expectancy was low with few people making it beyond the age of forty it is not surprising that they married young with girls aged 12-14 and boys approximately 18-19 when the formal betrothal agreement was signed (the legal paperwork of marriage), with the marriage celebrations and religious service taking place up to a year later. This young carpenter and his even younger wife would have faced the prospect of this trip with some trepidation, not because they didn't know the way –they did- as their whole community would have trekked to Jerusalem at least once a year for one of the major festivals. Most likely Passover, as that Spring festival attracted enormous crowds of people in New Testament times. Their concerns would naturally have been related to the difficulties of the journey for a young woman nearly full-term with her first child. Then they would have had concerns of how much assistance they could get in delivering the baby; following that the whole process of feeding, toileting and clothing a baby! Even with family and friends around and all kinds of aids, even apart from disposable nappies! It is a steep learning curve for any new parents with a first child. What is important though is that they didn't shrink from the faith step before them and made the journey. Life then and now has its challenges and requires us to step into the unknown and trust God to take care of us and provide for our futures. Is that your situation just now? In human terms they were extremely vulnerable but God never asks us to do something without promising to assist us each step of the way. Paul's words in Philippians 4:19 ring out down the centuries: *And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.* Do you need to receive this promise and claim it today? The best part of a millennium earlier Proverbs 3:5-6 were written in God's Word: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.* Do you need to receive the encouragement of a promise like this? I doubt if formal 'risk assessments' had been around that Joseph and Mary would have been allowed to go to Bethlehem unaccompanied! Yet they went not only to obey the will of the Emperor, but also consciously or unconsciously to fulfil the words of the biblical prophets who sought to convey they remarkable lengths to which God would go to demonstrate His love to us. At the human level we could often say: 'I cannot do Because' As Christians we come at things in a different light. I am a follower of the Almighty God the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, who organised all these events to come to pass two thousand years ago, therefore, in my ordinary life it is not too difficult for God to take care of me and provide for my needs. Do you believe it and accept it? It is easy to say the words personally, or with respect to our families or to our church family, but when the pressure is on will we 'walk the walk' alongside 'talking the talk'? Luke with an economy of words simply indicates that Joseph went and did as he had been instructed to do, both by the Emperor and also by God in a dream (Matthew 1:18-25).

¹⁸ *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.*

¹⁹ *Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.* ²⁰ *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins. ²²All this*

took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’). ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave Him the name Jesus. The simplicity of the faith of these teenagers is an inspiration to all of us. The exercise of their faith is an example. God’s love was revealed to and vindicated in the obedience of Mary and Joseph. What about you and me today – how are we getting on in trusting God for our future?

4. The Circumstances in which Jesus was born (Luke 2:6-7)

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 (Luke 2:1-7). Bethlehem was a tiny place. It wouldn’t take too many people for the ‘spare beds and rooms’ to be used up. In fact we mustn’t think of a Premier Inn or a Travel Lodge here. Staying at an inn at this time usually consisted of a series of open facilities off a courtyard with some fodder for your animals and the means to cook your own food, before you laid down to sleep on your own clothes and bags. These were very basic facilities compared to what we enjoy today. Yet even this kind of space was unavailable for this young couple. Instead they shared a cave that doubled up as a shelter for animals and placed the newborn baby in a feeding trough designed for feeding animals! What matters is that when they stepped out in faith God provided not exactly what they wanted but all that they needed on this journey. The God who provided for them on the trip to Bethlehem would next provide all they needed on the approximately four years as asylum seekers in Egypt, before they were free to go home after the death of the sadistic local ruler in Judea, Herod (Matthew 2:16-23). God’s love to this family was to be demonstrated in some extraordinary ways through situations we would naturally shrink from. The challenge for us this Christmas, like for them 2,000 years ago, is simply this: am I willing to step out in faith for Jesus in new ways? Do I insist on playing it safe and refusing to entertain the possibility that God may have something new in store for us in the coming days? These two teenagers are role models to us –most of whom are much older than they were at that time. However, age is not the issue- obedience is! God wants to shower His love on us as His obedient disciples this Christmas – may He be pleased to find us willing and obedient to Him, Amen.