

The birth of Christ

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the second passage that we read. The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 2. And we may read again at verse 7.

And she gave birth, that is Mary, to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

I believe that comparing the Gospel narratives can be a very rewarding exercise. And one of the striking and fascinating factors for me is the difference between the ways in which the Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, introduces to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew's focus appears to be on his kingly remit. Mark introduces us to him as an adult at the outset of his public ministry.

John goes back into the eternal realm in his prologue, where he speaks of, in the beginning, was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was face to face with God, and the Word was God.

[1 : 40] He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of man.

Luke's approach, on the other hand, is different still. His approach seems to focus more on how Christ is born into poverty.

So, as each Gospel writer approaches their theme of good news, because that is, in essence, what the word Gospel means, they do so as those who are guided by the Holy Spirit, but from very different perspectives.

If I confine myself for the moment to a brief comparison between Matthew and Luke, Matthew speaks of a group of men coming from afar to greet the newborn child.

Note, Matthew doesn't say in his account that they were a group of three, as is often the portrayal.

[3 : 07] It was a group there introduced to us as a group of wise men, but it doesn't say there were just three. The impression is that there were many more than three, and the Bible never says that there were just three.

They seem to be a large group of people that attract the attention of those in government. They bring gifts in keeping with their understanding of who the child was.

They were seeking the King of the Jews. It was a quest that caused huge consternation and alarm in the court of King Herod.

And it led to a decree being issued by Herod that resulted in the massacre of all male infants under two years of age.

Matthew tells us he killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under. Their gifts, we are told, behold, the star that they had seen when it rose before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

[4 : 26] They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy, and going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrer.

They brought the most expensive gifts they could find. The gifts are understood as being in keeping with that concept of the identity of the child.

But Luke comes to his narrative of the incarnation from a totally different angle altogether.

He focuses on the theme of poverty. And he tells us about his birth as one who is born into a world of poverty.

We hear much about poverty in our own day, about increasing demands on food banks, for example.

[5 : 40] We hear about the failings of the rollout of universal credit, compounding poverty. I believe that there may be many and varied reasons for the level of poverty that we hear.

As a non-politician, I think I can safely say that, that there is no one reason that can be attributed to the cause of the poverty that we hear about.

And often those who have never required to use these services might be accused of not being able to understand why people need these particular services.

But you cannot say that about this person. He is born into poverty. Mary, in her own reflections, as contained in her song of praise recorded for us by Luke in chapter 1, shows that she recognizes that he came to minister to the poor and to the needy.

Now, before anyone might begin to accuse me of embracing liberation theology, let me say that the poor and needy to whom he comes to ministers are those who are poor and needy in the spiritual sense.

[7 : 16] sin has made the family of Adam spiritually and morally bankrupt. And Jesus came to those, to minister to those who are shown and accept, not just shown that they are spiritually and morally bankrupt.

Many people are shown that they are spiritually and morally bankrupt. But not everyone accepts that they are spiritually and morally bankrupt.

And it is to those who are not just shown, but who accept their spiritual and moral bankruptcy, it is to these that he ministers.

You may remember that I did say the last Sunday morning, I was with you two weeks ago, that Luke is a rigorous and careful researcher.

And from your own Bible reading, you may remember that in the opening, five verses of his gospel, Luke sets out his purpose in writing the gospel.

[8 : 29] He wants to provide an orderly account based on eyewitness testimony so that his friend, Theophilus, for whom he is writing this account, may have certainty about the things that he has been taught concerning Jesus of Nazareth.

Of course, Luke is not confining himself to instructing Theophilus. He hopes that the readership of his gospel will share in the teaching that he wishes to have sent before Theophilus.

He is, Luke is really anxious to provide history, not myth and fable, not something that is mere metaphor for some philosophical idea or a body of abstract ethics.

Luke is concerned to help us understand, to help Theophilus know and us to know that if Jesus Christ and the truth concerning him is not historical fact, it's not worth believing at all.

It's not, it is not true in any sense. And you see that same concern in these opening verses of chapter 2.

[9 : 48] In verses 1 to 3, he is anxious to show us that Jesus was born at a particular historical moment in this world when Caesar Augustus issued a decree that the world should be registered, that's within the Roman Empire, and the whole Roman Empire responds to that decree.

Locally, Quirinius, the governor, obeys the decree of Caesar, and this one little family, like many others, have to make their way to their ancestral home to be registered in the census.

In other words, Luke wants us to see that this is something that really happened. He wants us to see that it is real, real history.

And you notice, he even records this minor detail, this was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

There, you have him placing the historical background to the birth of Christ, right down to minute detail. It seems to me that Luke appears to notice things that are missed by the other gospel writers.

[11 : 20] Now, does that arise from his training as a physician? Well, I like to think so.

The importance for a physician to observe, to listen. You see, it's very important for someone who is in medicine to listen to the patient before they come to a diagnosis.

And it seems to me that this man who was a physician is listening carefully. And therefore, he is observing things that perhaps might be missed by someone who is not listening so carefully.

So, as he develops this theme of poverty, he gives added emphasis to the poverty theme. When he writes of the visitors who came to view the child.

Who were the visitors that Luke records for us? They were shepherds. They were poor men. They weren't bearing expensive gifts when they came to view the child.

[12 : 38] They were poor men. You will also no doubt remember that after 40 days, Luke tells that Mary and Joseph came to the temple to offer up the prescribed sacrifice.

And again, you cannot fail, but notice, it is the cheapest option that they bring for sacrifice. The requirement was for a lamb to be brought.

For a burnt offering and a pigeon for a sin offering. The law prescribed, if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtle doves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering.

They didn't have the expensive sacrifice. They couldn't afford it. They brought the sacrifice of the poor. So, it seems to me that Luke is setting before us a clear indication of the poverty into which Jesus was born.

And it is a further reminder of the humiliation of his incarnation. Do you remember how Paul develops this thought in his second letter to the Corinthians?

[13 : 59] He has it in a passage because Paul often links theological writing and teaching with practical Christianity. And he develops this thought in his second letter to the Corinthians in the passage dealing with Christian givings.

I say this not as a command but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know, he says, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, he possessed the riches of eternal glory.

Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor. And the purpose of his becoming poor was that you by his poverty might become rich.

So, I'd like to focus on some of the contrasts that are set before us regarding the birth of Christ.

First of all, from our text, the person born.

She gave birth to her firstborn son. Secondly, the place where born. And thirdly, the people's response.

[15 : 21] The person born, the place where born, the people's response. The person born. Luke writes, Mary gave birth to her firstborn son.

Here is an apparently insignificant person, Mary, from a human perspective at least. And yet, chosen by God to give birth to this son.

One writer speaks of Mary. I don't know if you will agree with this view. I'm not sure that I do myself. But he speaks of her in this way as a nobody in a nothing town in the middle of nowhere.

God chose Mary. not the daughter of privilege. Not the daughter of Caiaphas, the high priest. And you remember what this young girl is told about the identity of the child she would carry and bring into the world.

Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the most high and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end.

[16 : 44] She is told his name Jesus a name that means God saves or the Lord is salvation.

She is also told he will be great. The angel didn't limit his greatness in any way. In the Old Testament when the word great is used without qualification it almost always refers to God himself. His goodness is great. His wisdom is great. His works are great. His power is great. His mercy is great. So great is his greatness that he alone deserves to be called great.

Jesus greatness is the greatness of God. He is not just the son of the most high but he will be called the son of the most high.

A phrase again that is favored by David. I will sing praise you'll find in the Psalms to the name of the Lord the most high.

[17 : 54] It's a title that belongs to Jesus in a unique way. Divine sonship is his eternal identity as the second person of the Trinity.

This child is no less than the son of God in our nature. How astonishing that must have been for angelic beings to witness the great and dreadful God.

this consuming fire assuming the character and the office of the savior of sinners. The creator becoming a creature the eternal and infant of days the omnipotent a man compassed with infirmities the supreme ruler of all that lives the second person of the Trinity the only begotten son the radiance of the father's glory.

One who shared in the full perfection of God's triune being the supreme law giver made of a woman made under the curse of a violated law.

The son of God in the dark womb of Mary in embryonic humanity assuming our human nature the king of glory taking our flesh.

[19 : 29] Does the writer to the Hebrews express it since therefore the children share in flesh and blood he himself likewise partook of the same thing. Can your mind grasp it?

God stretches your ability to take in what is taking place in the conception and the birth of God coming into the world.

You remember how the hymn writer expresses it God of God light of light lo he abhors not the virgin's womb. Right from the very fragile beginning of life why does he become an embryo? And I suppose the answer that many would give because he loved sinners is that the answer that you would give today?

Do you think that adequately covers it? that it is because of his love that he appeared in this way?

[20 : 42] You know people love many things in the world but you do not show your love by becoming the object of your love do you?

Did almighty God and the person of his son need to enter into our flesh to show us his love? There are many demonstrations of his love that surround us in life.

Surely there are deeper reasons. He takes our weakness our frailty at its most weak and most frail. He shares our experience of pain, sorrow, bereavement and temptation. He experienced temptation as none other. because he stood up to the full onslaught of satanic wiles and all that force. He entered into our death. He tested death for our salvation. In all its bitterness he knew divine forsaking.

[21 : 56] That's why I believe he came in this way. Because the price demanded by the holy law of God could only be paid by God in our nature.

So that no one can ever say to him that he does not understand poverty. Remember perhaps some of you are familiar with the writings of Dougal B'Hanon.

A translation of his poem of the sufferings of Christ. Oh wonder most amazing that human tongue can name the eternal and immutable a suckling child became.

The person born. The son of God in our nature. Not simply a bigger or better version of a human being. But altogether different.

He is God in our nature. And we are not God. His attributes are infinitely superior to ours.

[23 : 10] He is the creator. We are but his creatures. And that brings me to the second place. The place we're born.

This is not another irony. The maker of the universe in all its vast immensity. Now you look out on a frosty winter's evening where there's clear visibility.

When you look at the myriad of stars you can't count them. The immensity of the universe. But no room could be found for him.

He's the creator of this vast universe. universe. But there was no place for him. And so his mother is compelled to give birth in the place where the animals are kept.

The pungent, acrid smells associated with the place where domestic animals are kept. And there Mary gives birth.

[24 : 31] there's no royal physician in attendance for such a royal birth. Remember in the intimation of his conception there is reference to his royal lineage.

But there's no indication that in his entrance into this world and true humanity that he belongs to royal, the royal line.

He's not in a sanitized area. But there in the mire, Mary gives birth to her first born. Remember, it's not his birth that is miraculous.

It's his conception that is miraculous. miraculous. She gives birth to the first born. His birth is like other children.

His conception is miraculous. But it is the identity of the person born that fills with wonder and amazement.

[25 : 49] You know, the place where he was born would not be a comfortable place to sleep, although I doubt that sleep was uppermost in the mind of Mary as she entered into labor.

In short, everything we know about the birth of Jesus points to obscurity, indignity, pain, rejection.

And the poverty theme was further emphasized, he is laid in a manger, a feeding trough for animals, not a cot, not a cradle.

Some think the feeding trough is made of wood. And they see, as it were, a connection between what they consider to be a wooden feeding trough as foreshadowing the wooden cross on which you would ultimately be torn.

I'm not quite sure of that in my own mind, because the Bible doesn't say that it was made of wood. You know, it may make for nice thoughts, but the Bible doesn't say that it was made of wood, except that it was placed in a feeding trough.

[27 : 15] the feeding trough or the manger may just have been hollowed out of the ground. Here is the all knowing, the all seen, the all powerful and all glorious Son of God.

He's placed in a feeding trough. And he is placed there in order to fill the hungry with good things. There's no tremendous welcome of praise from the peoples of all nations coming to worship them. As one writer puts it, he deserved to have the creation itself offered in worship, with the rocks crying glory, and the galaxies dancing for joy.

But that doesn't happen. He is God the Son. And anything less than absolute acknowledgement of his royal person is an insult to his divine dignity.

He is wrapped in swaddling cloths. There's no royal kingly robes. The swaddling cloths were used to bind the limbs of the newborn.

[28 : 48] And the reason that they used these swaddling cloths, the belief was that the limbs of the newborn would grow deformed unless they were tightly bound in this way.

there was an element of ignorance in this practice. Remember there is even more ignorance in the fact when he was bound by the hands of cruel men or ignorant men and nailed to the cross.

And you remember Luke, it's Luke who places emphasis on this in his acts narrative, killed by the hands of lawless men. He is treated with medical ignorance at his birth and treated with spiritual ignorance at his death.

Laid in a feeding trough to emphasize his humiliation. Placed in a feeding trough to indicate that he identifies with the poor.

Can you even imagine how off-putting it would have been to most of society in those days had he been clothed in royal apparel, born in the palace.

[30 : 10] Spurgeon makes the observation by being laid in a manger he proved himself a priest taken from among men, one who has suffered like his brethren and therefore can be touched with a feeling of our infirmities.

And Luke himself records for us later on in his gospel this man receives sinners and deers with them. Even as an infant by being laid in a feeding trough he was being set forth as the sinner's friend.

So that all who are weary and heavy laden are invited to come to him. All who are broken in spirit, all who are bowed down in soul, all who may despise themselves and are despised of others, come to him no matter how ashamed you might be.

Because in the manger he is placed unguarded, humanly speaking, and unshielded from our gaze. Yes, the throne might fill us with awe, but the manger of the feeding trough of the son of David invites us to draw near the place where he was born, the person who was born, and finally the people's response.

[31 : 49] It is summarized for us in these words, there was no room for them in the end. There was no room in the palace, no room in the corridors of power, and you cannot but wonder how much room there is today for him too in the corridors of power.

Lip service is paid, but it is my persuasion that our problems as a nation are increased and compounded because we have jettisoned much of what the Bible teaches.

As a nation we have been subjected increasingly to a secular agenda which has no room, no place for Jesus, no room in the corridors of power for the Jesus of the feeding trough.

All but take it closer to home. Is there a place for him in your home and a place for him in your heart and in mine?

Is it possible that you are here today and that you are saying, yes I have room for him, but I'm not worthy that he should come to me.

[33 : 22] I'm not asking you about your worthiness, but have you room for him in your life. Is there room for the Christ of God, the Son of the Most High?

Is there room for him in your life so that you bow down and worship and adore and praise the Son of God so that he becomes preeminent in your life?

Is there a void in your life today? Are you trying to fill it from other sources, through other agencies, let me tell you friend, you are on in pursuit of a course of action that will never succeed, because the void that is in your life can only be filled by the one who was born and placed in the manger.

Or, you are saying, but you don't know my heart, minister. It's full of so many things.

Well, he was placed in a feeding trough. There's nothing much laudable about that, is there?

Especially the kind of feeding trough that he was placed in.

[35 : 01] is your heart like the feeding trough? Dirty. it's not how you feel.

Well, he comes to purify and to make clean. So, if you have gone far in your life, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart, because today is the accepted time today is the day for salvation.

That you might have that joy that filled the heart of one who waited for the revelation of Christ.

And the moment that he saw this child, even as a child, he rejoiced. Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace.

According to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation. Every minister of the gospel is empowered to go out with the message that their master wants home.

[36 : 36] Oh, my friend, is the room closed in your life? Is the door firmly locked?

Because here is one who can take you out of the horrible pit on the mighty clay. One who can raise you up to newness of life.

But have your room for them. There was no room in the end. And you notice what Luke says, there was no place for them in the end.

You know, it wasn't just that there was no place for the infant. out. But there was no place for those associated with them.

What does that tell us? When you become a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, the world has no place for you.

[37 : 50] No place for you. don't be fooled by the fact that the world may laud you and befriend you.

Because deep down the world has no room. Not only for Christ, but for those associated with Christ.

Here is one then, wrapped in swaddling cloths, one ultimately wrapped in grave clothes that he left behind.

It's an indication of the place where he lay. Who is at the right hand of God above in his rightful place and position, but who entered our world.

Have you room for this Christ? Let us pray.