

Food for Thought

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Date: 24 December 1998

Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 00] This is the evening service on December the 24th, 1998.

The preacher is Phil Millman and his topic is food for thought.

The night was still and cool. We wish. The night was still and cool and there was a crispness in the air which had a bite to it, creating the desire to draw closer to the fire.

There was the odour of the animals, the sheep and the goats. Even the smell of the sacrifice was just discernible. The dew was delicately setting upon the grass.

The combination of the dry with the now damp caused a perfume to rise which was ever pleasing to these hardened shepherds out there in the fields.

[1 : 05] And it seemed that no matter how many times their senses had been embraced by this strange perfume, it always brought a welcome sense to their hearts.

It was ever new and it brought a soothing relief to the tired and weary bodies of these hard-working men.

The smell in the air and the cool and barming embrace of the dew could not be sensed in this stale and suffocating environment of the barn which this teenager and her fiancé had rented for the evening.

The dust was present in every breath they breathed. There hung the odour of domesticated animals.

Every sense was encased with the closeness of this barn. The smell and the sound of the animals, the rough and abrasive texture of the hay and straw added to the sensory overload.

[2 : 16] Everywhere the couple looked, there was a continual reminder that this was no place to have a child. And yet, they could not be allowed to pervade their already tired and road-wearied minds.

The pain, the pain, it was increasing. It was shutting out all the other sensory responses to the environment. And yet, with the heavy breathing, there was the continual reminder that they were in a barn.

The dust, the smell of animal urine mingled with the sweetness of the hay. The pain, there it was again and again and again.

More and more intense. Pain, pain like the body had never ever experienced. Why did God do this to me?

Why me? Where are the midwives? The pain. The night air was becoming cooler by the minute.

[3 : 33] And with the increasing coolness, sound was being carried. In the distance, people could be heard in quiet conversation.

Husband and wife were sharing the remnants of the busy day with their children. Stories were being shared around the fire. And young eyes were slowly shutting in all the activity of the day, only to be mused upon in the quiet hours of sleep.

The screams broke the spell which seemed to have settled on this otherwise sleepy little town. The townsfolk had heard this all before.

Many a night and day had been pierced by this sound. And these people too had often mused at how such pain could bring such delight.

The coolness of the night air may have begun to be all pervading to the shepherds out there on the hills surrounding Bethlehem.

[4 : 35] But with every breath that teenager took, not a fraction of it was to cross her heated lips. Sweat dripped from her burrow, frowned as she gripped the rough and nailed timber of the cattle store.

Her hands, pale in colour, were drained of blood. As again the pain caused her to clench those rough timbers.

The pain, again and again and again. The breathing, in a now warm and humid atmosphere, stale with the odour of the animals.

One last scream. Why God? Why me? Why this pain? Silence.

The air held an expectation. Somehow something had changed. Even the atmosphere within the barn had changed.

[5 : 41] It was now charged. Charged with anticipation. The pain had gone. The screaming had settled. A cry. But this wasn't the cry of a mother in labour.

This wasn't the anguished cry of the teenager in pain. This was the cry of the product of her labour. High pitched.

Tremulous. Music. It was as if there had only been one breath that night within the village. As each person, hearing the painful screams in turn, breathed a corporate sigh of relief at the music of this young cry.

Another child had been born. Another whitened and bloodied bundle would be laid on the virgin breast of a now young mother.

No hot water. No clean towels. Just some long strips of cloth and a dusty stall in which to lay this child.

[6 : 48] Well, that's of course an interpretation of the birth of Jesus. And picks up some of the ideas we've looked at.

We've read from that reading from Luke. And I wonder if we have ever thought of the birth of Jesus in this light. Have we ever considered the surroundings into which the Saviour of the world, Jesus Christ, was to be born into?

It's certainly not the sanitised environment that many of us have been born into, is it? In our Western culture, we would be appalled to think of a child being born in such conditions, especially a child of such keenly status.

Yet, these were the conditions that Jesus was born into. We see the humanity of God here by the way in which he came into the world.

Think about a baby for a moment. Just think about it for a minute. But to me, personally, there has been nothing more wondrous in my lifetime than to see the birth of my three children, than to be there, present, on that occasion.

[8 : 00] Each time has been an occasion of great joy. And as we care for our children from birth, you can't help but realise how dependent they are upon you to care for them.

Jesus, God in the flesh, was born to the Virgin Mary and was totally dependent upon her and humans to care for him as much as any other child is.

To think that God, the creator of all things, the creator of you and me, the stars, the universe, should choose to enter the world in this manner and in these surroundings, these putrid surroundings, is amazing.

Why did he do it? It's not out of necessity or need for him to survive as God, I don't think. It's far from it.

Let me touch on two reasons. God entered the world in this way so that he could identify with us. God became man.

[9 : 11] God took on human form, Jesus. And Jesus experienced life here in the earthly realm. He knew the sort of joys that we know.

He knew the joys of family life, of going to parties, weddings, closeness of friendships. He knew all about that. He also knew about pain and suffering and sadness.

He wept as friends died. People he knew turned their backs on him. And ultimately, he was put to death in such a cruel and horrific way at the hands of human beings.

He knows what it's like to suffer. For this Christmas time, for many of you, may be a time of great joy and fun. Jesus experienced such joy also.

But for some, Christmas may be a time of sadness or loneliness. Jesus is with you at this time because he identifies with that. He's not too distant.

[10 : 19] He's not distant. But he wants you to share these things. Your loneliness, your sadness, and your suffering with him. He wants you to share that. Secondly, why did God enter the world as a man?

To demonstrate his love for us and make it possible for us to be put into a right relationship with him. Let me read to you a paraphrase of the last Bible reading that Joanne read to us from John chapter 3, which sums this up so well.

This is how much God loved the world. He gave his son, his one and only son. And this is why. So that no one need be destroyed.

By believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it really was.

He came to help. He came to help to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted. Anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it.

[11 : 41] And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him. through Jesus' birth and subsequent death on the cross, God offers us the opportunity to know real forgiveness and enter into a personal relationship with him.

Finally, as we celebrate Christmas this year, as we celebrate it in our environments, let us also remember and take some time to reflect about the environment that Jesus entered into.

While our Christmas dinners might be in cosy surroundings, let us recall the surroundings of that first Christmas night when the Saviour of the world, Jesus Christ, was born into such humble and simple surrounds.

Why? For us. To show us the depths of God's love for humankind, for you and for me. Amen.