

20 December 2020

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Reading: Luke 2:1-7

On Friday it is Christmas Day. The one day of the year most people plan for *long* in advance... Houses are decorated, gifts bought, meals prepared... And then, when all the family arrives, fantastic chaos bursts loose, and a special time is had by all.

Up until 2020 that is! Because after yesterday's announcement by the First Minister, lots of the limited plans we *were* allowed to make this year now has to be cancelled too.

Nobody wanted this, and lots of people are upset, but in reality, there is absolutely nothing we can do. This virus is real, and the only way in which we'll be able to get through this pandemic, is if we *all* obey the rules. Whether we like it or not, however hard it may be.

And the *reason* this is so hard to accept, is because over the years, Christmas has become a BIG celebration. And many people actually feel under pressure to make sure that they have the **perfect** Christmas...

But you know, Christmas didn't start big. In actual fact, the birth of Jesus was quite a plain and simple affair.

Let's take a wee look at how Luke describes this for us:

In this whole narrative we can see a very clear contrast between business and stillness; between the big and the small; the grand and the ordinary.

Caesar Augustus was an important man. He had the power to shift whole populations. It almost sounds as if when he snapped his fingers, things happened.

He decreed that everybody had to travel to their hometown to register in a census.

Please remember that 1st century Palestine is literally worlds apart from 2020 Britain.

Something like registering for a census can be done simply by the click of a button today – but *they* had to gather up their belongings and start walking. For days, some even for weeks.

Bethlehem wasn't a big place. And if everybody who belonged there turned up at the same time – can you imagine the chaos? Lots and lots of people!

If you think that having all the family under your roof for Christmas is chaotic, this would have been 100 times worse! There would have been people everywhere!

The picture I have in my head about that type of chaotic, yet special, gathering at Christmas, is the festivities that usually take place in Edinburgh.

People flock there from all over to Edinburgh's Christmas, not wanting to miss out on the action, browsing the stalls at the German market shoulder to shoulder with strangers, admiring the lights and enjoying the festive atmosphere.

And although it can be an amazing experience, the crowds can be exhausting.

So, this important guy tells all the world what they have to do, and Luke moves his focus from the crowds and zooms in on a certain couple who has to adhere to this rule too: Mary and Joseph.

The big important guy in comparison to the ordinary couple. Expecting a baby.

We have this picture in our heads of Mary sitting on a donkey – but only the lucky ones in those days had donkeys, and the donkey was usually used for carrying their things, not to ride on.

Nevertheless, this couple arrives on foot, or by donkey, looking for a place to stay.

And here once again their culture stands in stark contrast to ours...

When we read that there was no room for them in the Inn, we assume all the hotels and B&Bs were fully booked, but there was no such thing in small towns in Biblical times. The word translated here with "Inn" actually means something like a guest room.

See, in those days, family would always stay with family. A house usually had only one room, on 2 levels – one for the people and the other for the animals.

Seeing that they travelled to the town they came from, means that they must have had family there, but because so many people had to be there at the same time, there just wasn't enough room for them in any of their family member's homes.

So they were offered a stable, which actually wasn't that uncommon in those days.

In contrast to them, if we travel anywhere that is some distance away from where we live, we will usually arrive by plane, train, car, or bus...

And in no time we would be able to find a room in a hotel or a B&B, because we are spoiled for choice. And we most probably would have booked and paid in advance, so there would be no turning away from doors shut in our faces...

But as soon as Mary and Joseph found a place to stay – where they could have been for *weeks*, by the way; no popping over somewhere for only a few hours or a day in those days – Luke takes the focus away from the crowded, busy city, to the quietness of the stable.

Not the ideal place to have a baby, but at least they had a roof over their heads. I can only imagine how messy and even noisy it must have been in that stable, but Luke chooses not to focus on any of this – he focuses

only on what was important... The atmosphere at the birth of Jesus – which was that of perfect peace.

That's the only thing important enough for Luke to mention, the thing he wants his readers to take in and remember.

A very simple event, that had a huge impact on the whole wide world – even bigger than anything Caesar Augustus could ever come up with.

But let's stop in that peaceful stable for a moment.

Because looking back on all this, it is very clear that beneath the surface, God was moving. A lot of wee things had to fall into place for the Saviour of the world to be born in Bethlehem, as Scripture foretold.

And you know – all this makes me think so much about our situation at the moment.

It is utter chaos out there. Caused by a virus. Nobody understands it completely. People are scared, confused, and anxious.

But underneath all that, I truly believe that God is still moving.

If everything gets too much for you, just find that still centre, where God is.

In that busy chaotic Bethlehem, the still centre was a stable where a miracle happened. Quietly, without any fuss.

The news about the level 4 lockdown and all matters relating to Covid19 might be big news at the moment – but let me remind you, there is even bigger news underneath all this – and that is the reminder that at Christmas-time God sent his son to earth to save us all.

This amazing story, as it is told by Luke, seems to act as a reminder that there are events in the world that grab all the headlines and make all the noise, but we are encouraged to look beneath the surface for the still small things, where God is moving.

So maybe, just maybe, celebrating a simple, quiet Christmas, at home, this year, with none of the fuss and elaborate festivities, will help us to focus on the reason why we celebrate Christmas in the first place.

Because ultimately – none of the things we associate with Christmas, is as important as the birth of a child, for our salvation.

May every single one of you experience true peace this Christmas, the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ – an acceptance, a calmness, amidst everything that is going on in the world; a contentment, that only someone with faith would be able to understand.

Let's praise God for becoming one of us in Jesus. We need him now, more than ever. Let's not look for him in the wrong places – because he is always with us. Not in the headlines, but beneath the surface; right here in our hearts.

Amen