

## **Worshipping God Together**

### **Call to worship**

Minister: Unless the Lord builds the house, its  
builders labor in vain.

**All:** Unless the Lord watches over the  
city, the watchmen stand guard  
in vain.

**MP 269**

**I do not know what lies ahead**

### **Opening prayer and the Lord's Prayer**

The Psalmist says: "The Lord is good; his love is eternal And his faithfulness lasts forever." Let us pray:

Lord, we thank you for the wise men who  
so faithfully followed the star that led to you.  
May we be as willing to follow you,  
wherever that may take us  
and to be continually excited by the things you show us.

There are all kinds of temptations for us to make idols of things  
or people.

Sometimes we feel in danger of being swept along by the tide.

For the times we don't seek you out but go our own way:

**forgive us, Lord.**

For the times we know your way yet still wilfully choose our own:

**forgive us, Lord.**

For the times we act first, then ask you afterwards:

**forgive us, Lord.**

Help us always to remain true to Jesus, our guiding star.

We ask this ALL IN His name who taught us to pray:

**ALL:** Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever.

Amen.

## **Reflecting on God's Word**

Reading: Luke 2:1-7 (NT page 1027)  
Reader: Andrew Coutts

### **Background to the reading**

Luke is the only Gospel writer who reveals that Jesus' first bed was a manger because there was no room for them in the "*kataluma*" – which is translated with inn or place of lodge. I have a problem with this translation as it does not reflect the real meaning in its original cultural context. I would rather translate it with "guestroom" or upper room". The word seems to be connected with the idea of hospitality in a private house rather than a stay in a public inn. Luke with his usual care distinguishes between this and another word *pandocheion*, which can be translated to mean "inn". Luke uses *kataluma* for the "guest room" where the Last Supper was held in chapter 22 verse 11. It thus corresponds to the spare or upper room in a private house or in a village.

But this is all that Luke says about the birth of Jesus. All the rest that we have come to know or say about Jesus being born in a stable is assumptions. We do not know what the real situation was. Some researchers are of the opinion that as it was custom to stay with family members, and because the guest rooms have been vacated by other family members, that Joseph had no other option but to move into the stable of a family member's house. Others have speculated about the possibilities that the stable would have been empty because of the fact that the sheep were grazing in the fields. But again it is all assumptions.

So what do we know about the birth of Jesus according to Luke?

Luke linked the birth of Jesus to a historical fact in order to avoid any speculations about the authenticity of his birth. He says it was during the time that the Roman Emperor Augustus issued a

decree whereby all citizens in his empire need to partake in a wide scale census. Censuses were important for evaluating taxation; they were generally conducted locally, so all local governments in all regions probably did not simultaneously implement Caesar's decree.

It was also during the time that Quirinius was the Governor of Syria. The governor of Syria is mentioned because the Roman province of Syria included Palestine under its jurisdiction at this time.

Although Egyptian census records show that people had to return to their homes for a tax census, the home to which they returned was where they owned property, not simply where they were born. Joseph would most certainly have rights to the family's property in Bethlehem which could explain why he had to go to Bethlehem. It can also be an indication that they were in fact residing in his family's property, albeit not in the usual guest room.

Joseph was betrothed to Mary. Betrothal provided most of the legal rights of marriage, but intercourse was forbidden. Although tax laws in most of the empire required only the head of a household to appear, the province of Syria (then including Palestine) also taxed women.

When Jesus was born Luke only tells us that Mary "wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger". The "swaddling clothes" were long cloth strips used to keep babies' limbs straight so they could grow properly. Midwives normally assisted at birth; especially because this was Mary's first child, it is likely (though not clear from the text) that a midwife would assist her. Jewish law permitted midwives to travel a long distance even on the Sabbath to assist in delivery.

The manger was a feeding trough for animals; sometimes these may have been built into the floor.

It seems obvious that Luke placed a lot of emphasis on the fact that there was no guest room available for Jesus' birth. It seems as if he is showing us the contrast between an earthly king or emperor and Jesus, the heavenly king who came to serve and not to be served. It is also clear that Jesus' humble beginning would repeat itself throughout his ministry as not all people had a place for him in their hearts. In the end of his earthly ministry He was crucified on the cross because the powers to be and a lot of the people of his time had no place for HIM.

## **MP 628**

## **Tell me the old, old story**

### **Sermon**

The text verse for the sermon is verse 7b: "She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room for them."

I found the fact that there was no guest room available remarkable in the sense that it almost goes unnoticed. It is only then - that you realise we do not have a lot of detail with regard to Jesus' actual birth. Was there a midwife? Was there a innkeeper? Was it a stable?

It is also then when you do look at the facts being mentioned by Luke that you grasp his real intention of his writing. It is then that the message comes clearly to the forefront. There was no guest room available for the Messiah, Jesus to be born! And the undeniable fact that people would not have a "place" for Him would continue all through his ministry and even after He ascended to heaven.

It is most certainly true of us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In our society there is almost a silence when it comes to just mentioning the name Jesus. I often see the discomfort on people's faces when I conduct a funeral and speaks about Jesus and His redemption. It is almost as if you are using a terrible swearword, making people feel very uncomfortable. It also seems true when

people get together and that how matter how good the atmosphere are, when someone mentions the name of Jesus, especially amongst non church goers – it is as if the atmosphere changes immediately. We have to confess - the vast majority of our world does not have a place for Jesus just like it was when He was born.

The only place where Jesus can truly be is in the hearts of all the believers. And we that has faith need to make sure He is a presence in our lives, everywhere we go. And people need to see it. We do not have to shout it from the rooftops.

But in order for people to see the presence of God in our lives we need to prioritise. We need to ask ourselves what is really important and focus on them rather wasting our time on the unimportant things, the things we often cannot change and the things that makes us unhappy and sad. We need to discern and use our talents, energy and money on the things that will make a huge difference in the village we live in, the places where we work, the places where we hang out with our buddies socially, the schools where our children and grandchildren goes to. We need to make a difference in the lives of other people through the way we treat them. If we treat other people with respect, in kindness and in love because Jesus has a place in our hearts, soon others will want to follow.

But Jesus must also have a place in our communities. I like the idea of a “church building” that is used in every community because it drives one point home to believers and non believers alike: it is for worshipping God irrespective if you believe or do not believe. I never grasped this until one day, a few years ago when I was still working and living in South Africa.

In South Africa my Presbytery had an outreach partnership with a black congregation in a shanty town. Their minister, Joel Makhu and I became very close friends and we used to come together and discuss spiritual and other matters. One day he mentioned to me how difficult it was for him to minister to his Parish without a

church building. According to him the people complained that "Jesus had no permanent place to stay in their shanty township". His congregation was growing at such a rapid pace, that there was hardly any room left under the shade of the one tree where he conducted his service. But he continued his ministry preaching God's Gospel despite the fact that his people had to sit in the blazing sun during his worship service that lasted for almost 3 hours.

I then spoke to our Presbytery and we decided to help them erect a church made with corrugated iron. Joel had to convince the local chief to give him some land to build the church on. Eventually the chief gave his congregation a large piece of land with only a few trees and no running water or sanitation. Joel and his congregation were ecstatic and building works soon began. Because it was the chiefs land no building approval was required. The members of his congregation started working in shifts and before long Joel had a good size church building. And after the opening of the new building his congregation almost doubled and before long people were standing outside listening to his sermons.

It was remarkable to hear the people talk about "Jesus who also had a permanent dwelling amongst them". People felt that He cared about them and that they despite their poverty and background was important to Him too.

I could see how the new church building made a big difference in that community. It changed the people's perspective about themselves and in a way the "church" shaped their society.

Can we say the same?

And again we must ask ourselves in the new year: if we close the doors of the church buildings in Kirknewton and East Calder, will our communities miss us? Did we exceed in convincing them that Jesus is present in all we do, say and think?

May we journey in the new year with God in our hearts and Him being at the centre of everything we as a church do in our villages!

Amen