

24 DECEMBER 2015 – WATCHNIGHT SERVICE

READING: Luke 2:1-7

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while[a] Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. 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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 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.

SERMON

Last week as soon as I walked into the sitting room and looked at our wee nativity scene on the mantelpiece, I noticed that “Batman” was sitting next to the stable. So at first I thought to remove “Batman” from the scene but then I decided to ask Henro who was guilty of putting Batman next to the nativity scene? Then Henro said: It was me! “Batman” is the wiseman.” I guess for him at least the Christmas story now makes better sense.

It was then that it dawned upon me that we really do not know a lot at all about the first nativity scene and yes, tonight’s reading is no exception.

Luke does not give us a lot of information re circumstances of the birth. He only says that “she gave birth to a son, wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn”.

This lack of information has lead in the past to a lot of speculation and urban legends.

But if we look at the text we know a few things, namely:

Jesus lay in a manger outside the human dwelling in an unusual place where there were only animals. From the text itself one cannot say in detail whether the manger was in a separate stall, or an enclosure in the open or the traditional cave.

The only thing we know is that the location was Bethlehem. All attempts to reconstruct the original scene, are hypothetical. The crib is undoubtedly closely bound up with the shepherd setting and with Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Davidic Messiah, and it is to be understood accordingly. The child in a manger wrapped in swaddling bands is, for the shepherds, a sign that the Messiah is born.

For Luke the manger expresses the contrast between the world-ruler Augustus and the hidden and lowly birth of the world-redeemer.

Luke makes the point here and later in chapter 9 that Jesus “had no place to lay down his head”.

This would become the crux of Jesus’ ministry on earth and also the imperative of Christian discipleship.

SO what is the meaning to us? First and foremost more information is not needed. We get the point.

“For nothing is impossible with God...”

Words that the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary. Words that echo down through the generations all the way from Abraham and Sarah. Words that still speak to us today.

In 1921 a stone pillar was erected in the grounds of Kirkton of Skene’s churchyard to commemorate local men and boys who lost their lives during the great war. (For those of you who don’t know, Skene is a small farming community about 6 miles west of Aberdeen.)

But this isn’t just any old war memorial – Skene war memorial has a mystery attached to it. If you look closely, you will notice that inbetween a certain two names the gap is a wee bit wider than between the rest, and that is the case because a name has been removed from the memorial.

Now why on earth would anybody want to remove a name from a memorial? Because a young man, called Livingstone, thought to be dead, unexpectedly returned home.

Now – to his friends and family, to everybody who knew him, that must have felt like a miracle! The impossible happened.

Jesus' birth is not only unexpected and surprising in so many ways, it's impossible. Yet Gabriel reminds us that nothing is impossible with God...

Every time someone walks past Skene war memorial, they are reminded that we people don't know everything, we can't see everything, we can't understand everything, we can't do everything.

But God can. Nothing is impossible with God. God decided to be born among animals and not in a fancy palace!

God promised that he would give Abraham and Sarah a big family. They had to get old before they saw this promise come true. On the way there they even doubted some times. But God always keeps his promises – in their old age he gave them a son and subsequently a family as big as the sand of the sea. Nothing is impossible with God.

God promised his people that he was going to send them a Saviour. They had to wait many, many years before they saw this promise come true. On the way there they even doubted some times. But God always keeps his promises – at the right time, he sent Jesus, and subsequently changed the whole world. Nothing is impossible with God.

But miracles like these aren't restricted to Biblical times, it's still part of our lives today. In 1925 young Livingstone's friends and family experienced a miracle.

Even today nothing is impossible with God.

If you're life feels like a mess – God can sort it out.

If you have lots of questions – God can answer them.

If you feel hopeless – God can give you hope again.

If you are worried or distressed – God can give you comfort.

Don't go look for the solutions to your problems or the answers to your questions in the world out there – go look for it in the manger. In Jesus God has already given us everything we need.

Let's not be like Abraham and Sarah who doubted God when he didn't fulfil his promise straight away. Let's trust God that He knows best and that he will give us what we need at the right time.

If we have to wait, let's wait patiently, let's not doubt, because God has a way of surprising us.

Sometimes we think that we know exactly where we're headed, we know exactly what we need... So did Mary, until that angel appeared to her.

God's presence in her life didn't only change her, it changed the world.

So let's allow God to work with us and through us, because then our lives *will* work out the way it should.

Because NOTHING is impossible with God.

Amen