

CHRISTMAS

Thoughts on the reason and meaning of Christmas

The Christian faith has a number of special days of celebration when Christians remember and celebrate an event which is associated with the birth and ministry of Jesus, for example Christmas, Easter and Pentecost being the main events.

It has always been part of God's plan of salvation for Mankind that a Saviour will come into the world, this Saviour was Jesus, born of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit. This baby was God/Man, who about 33 years later was to be crucified upon a cross for the sins of the world. We celebrate Christmas as it is the beginning of this wonderful act of grace by God.

We do not know exactly when Jesus was born, the western world has a calendar which was originally constructed to reflect the number of years since the birth, but the original research work had errors. Today it is believed that Jesus was probably born in 4 B.C. or earlier. The Biblical records suggests that the month was more probably earlier in the year, more possibly September or thereabout.

The wonder of the love and grace of God found in His Beloved Son, Jesus, starts to be revealed at the Birth of Jesus. Let's look and think about the people who were involved in this great event.

Meet the Characters and places of Christmas

Mary

Ever since the promise of a coming Messiah had been given, the young Jewish women had wondered if they would be selected for the privilege of being the mother of this child. Then at God's chosen time, the angelic messenger came to a young girl living in Nazareth, the time had come for the birth of the Messiah.

God first sent his angel to Mary to warn her of the task she had. The first words of Gabriel, as his greeting shows, are of the privilege of her position, *"Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women."* "What do these words mean," asks Mary. Gabriel explains,

[Luke 1:30-33.](#)

Mary has great difficulty in understanding what was happening, *"I am a virgin, how can this happen?"* questions Mary. Gabriel reassures Mary it is possible, because *"the Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee. Therefore also that Holy Being who shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. For with God nothing shall be impossible."*

[Luke 1:35-37](#)

Mary's response shows her submission to the will of God, *'I am the Lord's servant. Let it be as you have said.'*

[Luke 1:38.](#)

There is no record in the scriptures of what Mary would have gone through in the next nine months, undoubtedly she would have had to suffer the looks and talk of all her neighbour's, whispers such as "Who is the true father of this child?"

There must have been many doubts in her mind until she visits her elderly cousin Elizabeth. On seeing Mary, Elizabeth gives this wonderful greeting, *"God has made you happy and blessed you more than all other women. He has blessed your baby."*

The words of Elizabeth, when Mary arrived, showed Mary how important was the baby she carried. Elizabeth continued, *"Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Listen! When I heard your greeting, the baby inside me moved because he was glad. She who has believed what was told her is blessed. What the Lord said to her will come true."*

[Luke 1:42-43.](#)

Mary gives glory to God,

[Luke 1:46-55.](#)

Mary's awe and worship of this miraculous pregnancy is very obvious in these verses.

For the next three months Mary remains with Elizabeth.

Joseph

It is traditional that Joseph was much older than Mary, however, the only evidence of this is that in the Jewish system of betrothal, the girl was often much younger than the man. In addition there is no mention in scripture of Joseph during the ministry of Jesus 30 years later, it is presumed that as he was older, he had already died.

Betrothal in the Jewish system was much more binding than today's "engagement," the couple were legally bound to each other, though they did not live together as husband and wife, to end the betrothal there had to be a "divorce".

It must have been a terrible shock for Joseph when he was told that Mary was pregnant. He had always thought that Mary was pure and godly, her reported betrayal, her clearly seen cheating on him must have been a terrible shock to him. Joseph now had to decide what to do.

In [Matthew 1:18-19](#) we see the initial reaction of the man Joseph, despite the apparent failure by Mary he still considered the effect of the rejection upon her. Joseph could have publicly humiliate her, under the law he could have demanded she be stoned to death for the sin of adultery.

It appears that Joseph had decided to quietly dissolve the betrothal and while he considered the options he received a visit from the special angelic messenger which had previously visited Mary,

[Matthew 1:20-23](#).

The message given by the angel contains some important points:-

- Joseph was a descendant of King David, this places the coming stepson in the royal family line.
- That the Holy Spirit was the source of Mary's child.
- The name of the child had already been given, the name also describe the future mission of this baby, "to save His people from their sins".
- The birth of this child was a fulfillment of prophecy in the Jewish scriptures, with a very significant name, **Immanuel** -meaning "God with us"

To Joseph this message has a double meaning, Mary had not been unfaithful to him, he could marry her without any doubt in her purity, but secondly, how could he explain the child, no one would believe his story. Joseph had to make another choice,

[Matthew 1:24-25](#)

"Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:

And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus."

We are told of his decision. His obedience was personally costly to him, verse 25.

The Birth

Bethlehem

To carry out His plan God now uses the Human Government,

[Luke 2:1-5](#).

"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child."

Rome ruled the known world with absolute power. Under the control of God, Caesar Augustus instigates the need of a census. It is so amazing that the sovereign God puts the whole Roman empire into motion for this one reason, that Mary must be in Bethlehem, the city of David, for the birth of God's son, as prophesied,

[Micah 5:2](#).

"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah,

though thou be little among the thousands of Judah,

*yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel;
whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."*

It is possible that Joseph could have used the pregnancy as a reason for Mary not to make the journey, but he followed the command to the letter. Because of Joseph's obedience, the Son of God is born in Bethlehem, the city of David, as God had planned.

Place of birth

As a result of the census, the people have to travel to their place of birth. Joseph, being a descendent of David has to travel over eighty miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem,

[Luke 2:4-5](#).

"And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child."

Bethlehem was a village about five miles to the south of Jerusalem, not far from the Judean desert.

When Joseph and Mary arrive at Bethlehem there is no accommodation available. All that is offered for the woman, who is very near to child birth, was the animal stable of the inn.

[Luke 2:7](#).

"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."

It was in the home of the animals that the Son of God is born into the world, there He started His life as God/man in a manger, an animals food container for the creator of the universe.

[Angels.](#)

Who are angels?

The main meaning of the word "Angel" is that of messenger, one who is sent, this is the work that they are usually seen doing in the scriptures. It is obvious they are more than just messengers from God but this is the main task in the Christmas events.

The first angel we meet is Gabriel, an archangel, apparently the highest position in the angel structure. Gabriel appears to the main players with messages from God that the time of the Messiah has arrived.

Message 1.

Gabriel appeared to Zachararias, the ageing, childless priest who was to have the baby, John the Baptist, who was the start of the fulfillment of the Messiah, to *"prepare the way,"*

[Luke 1:5-22](#).

Message 2.

Six months later Gabriel comes to Mary in Nazareth,

[Luke 1:26-38](#), to inform her that she is to bare the Messiah child.

Message 3.

Gabriel visits Joseph with the message that Mary's child is of God, not of man.

[Matthew 1:20-25](#).

Message 4.

An angel, we are not given name but we presume was Gabriel, appears to the shepherds to announce the birth of the Messiah, [Luke 2:9-14](#), following the announcement the angel is surrounded with a heavenly multitude of angels praising God, [Luke 2:14-20](#).

Message 5.

Following the visit of the wise men they were warned to not go back to Herod with the location of the baby Jesus,

[Matthew 2:12.](#)

Message 6.

Joseph is warned in a dream by an angel to depart for Egypt before Herod comes seeking the child,

[Matt 2:13.](#)

Shepherds

It is interesting that the first people God chose to tell of the arrival of the Messiah was some poor humble shepherds out on the hills with their sheep,

[Luke 2:8.](#)

The area around Bethlehem has been connected with the sheep even as far back as when David guarded his fathers sheep. Many of the sheep grown in this area would have been used in the sacrifices made in the Jerusalem Temple. It is believed that there could be as many as 250,000 sheep sacrificed just during the Passover period. Therefore the sheep bred in this area had to be unblemished and in good health if they were to be used for the sacrifices.

The shepherds were watching over the sheep to protect these very valuable sheep from beasts of prey such as wolves and foxes and also thieves and bandits.

A shepherd was therefore considered ceremonially unclean because of their work, being in contact with blood and dead animals. Because of this they were spiritual outcast by the religious leaders and could not enter the temple without ceremonial cleansing.

We just cannot appreciate what these shepherds experienced. Sitting in the dark with just the sound of the sheep is suddenly interrupted by the brilliant figure, the Angel of God with a message,

"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

As soon as he ends, he is surrounded by many angels, from heaven.

[Luke 2:9-14.](#)

Why did God chose these to be the first with the announcement? These shepherd who were isolated from the people were not forgotten by God. The baby just born was to be the Lamb of God, to die for the sins of the world, including these lowly, "unclean" shepherds. This baby was to become:-

The Good Shepherd, [John 10:11,14](#);

The Chief Shepherd, [1 Peter 5:4](#);

The Great Shepherd,

[Hebrews 13:20](#);

The Shepherd and Bishop [1 Peter 2:25](#).

What were the thoughts of the shepherds when they found the baby as describe by the Angel, *"You shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."* The King of Heaven is laid in a stable, amongst the animals,

[Luke 2:15-16.](#)

After the shepherds have worshipped they took the message to the people, "The Messiah has arrived"

[Luke 2:17-18.](#)

Wise Men or Magi

Matthew is the only Gospel which records this incident.

The name Magi is used in reference to a tribe of the Medes who had a priestly function in the Persian Empire.

In [Daniel 1:20](#);

[Daniel 2:27](#);

[Daniel 5:15](#);

The name is applied to a class of "wise men" or astrologers who claimed to interpret dreams and messages from "gods".

It is therefore believed that the Magi of [Matthew 2:1-12](#) were probably non-Jewish religious astrologers who, from their astronomical observations, saw some sign in the heaven, which they believed indicated the arrival of a special Jewish King. They travelled from 'the East,' suggesting Persia or Arabia area. Because of this it is probable that it was some time after the birth, perhaps many months or even a year, that they arrived in Jerusalem, the fact that Herod killed the children up to 2 years confirms this. The scriptures do not tell us how many were present but it is assumed that there was only three because only three gifts were offered to the baby.

The Magi first search the city of Jerusalem for the child, but Herod heard of their search and invited them to meet him in the palace of King Herod. Also present where the Jewish chief priests and scribes, they told King Herod of the Bethlehem prophecy in [Micah 5:2](#), *But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting*, it clearly names Bethlehem as the place of birth of the Messiah.

The "star," many people have tried to connect this with some natural astronomical event, but it cannot explain how it lead the Magi to Bethlehem, in addition the scripture indicates that the "star" stopped over the place Jesus was. It can only be some special action or manifestation by God. In addition, the fact that they were given a special divine warning not to return to Herod, verse 12, indicated that the sign they follow had to be under divine control.

Herod

Called Herod the great, son of Antipater.

Antipater was made Procurator of Judea in 47 B.C. His son, Herod was appointed to the government of Galilee.

In 40 B.C. he became King of Judea. He had become a cruel and evil man, who also carrying out considerable building work in Jerusalem, including the Temple. There is documentary evidence that he died in 4 B.C., thus indicating that this was the latest possible date of the birth of Jesus. Our Western Calendar must be in error by at least 4 years.

The whole aim of his actions was to destroy anyone who claimed to be the King of the Jews. He knew that the Magi had taken some time to arrive from their country, so he kills all children who were up to 2 years old. But God had already warned Joseph and the family and the baby had already travelling to Egypt.

Simeon

Joseph now, as a faithful Jewish man, fulfilled the Jewish Law which required a sacrifice and ceremonial rituals for all new births within forty days after the birth,

[Gen 17:1ff](#);

[Lev 12:1ff](#).

After the period of purification for Mary according to the Law of Moses following the birth, Mary, Joseph and the baby come into the Temple in Jerusalem, "to present Him to the Lord, (as it is written in the law of the Lord: 'Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;')." The fact that all Joseph could offer was a turtledove shows how poor they were.

Simeon was a very elderly, devoted man, he obviously spend many hours each day in the temple,

[Luke 2:25](#).

This man had a close relationship with the Holy Spirit, an unusual situation at this time. The Holy Spirit had told Simeon that the Messiah would come before his death. On the day that Joseph and Mary bring the baby, Simeon is brought into the Temple and on seeing the baby he knows that God has fulfilled His promise,

[Luke 2:25-32](#).

Mary must have had many thoughts about the meaning of the words "yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also." As she stood at the foot of the cross years later she understood those words.

Anna

We know very little about Anna the prophetess, just three verses describe this woman. She was old, a widow for eighty-four years, served God in the temple day and night. "And she, coming in that instant to worship." What would have happened if Anna that day had decided not to go to worship in the temple? What she would have missed!! Anna's years of faithfulness was rewarded that day. But she did not stop there, she became the first missionary telling all of the Messiah's arrival.

The Warning

The plan of God was that His Son was to die upon the cross for the sins of the world, so Joseph is warned of the coming action of Herod and so Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus travel to Egypt until the death of Herod.