

Earth did not welcome Him, Heaven praised Him

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[0 : 0 0] Now we are going to pray together and ask the Lord to bless our time here. Let's pray.
Great is the mystery of our faith.

God was revealed in flesh, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up to glory.

Father, for the wonder and mystery of the word becoming flesh and living among us, of the one who was one with you becoming one of us, for us and for our salvation, we thank you.

Many here have seen many a Christmas, and perhaps the wonder has dulled. Perhaps the miracle of the coming into time and space of the Son of God has ceased to excite, ceased to move.

And we pray that today you will open our eyes, open our eyes to see what this story truly means. Open our hearts so that we may indeed truly love him who came into the world for us.

[1 : 1 0] Open our minds so that we may consider this great mystery. We know he came to a world like the world in which we live, a world of turmoil, a world of chaos, a world of fear, a world of politics and economics, a world where people hated each other, a world where he came to his own, and his own did not welcome him.

And so be with us now in these moments. Each of us have different needs, each of us come from different backgrounds, to which we will return. And as we look backwards to the story of Bethlehem, we also look upwards to the place where he has gone, and our eyes at last shall see him.

For that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above. And we pray that when we open your word, you will speak to us through its pages.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now we're going to have our first reading. There are two readings on the sheets on your chairs there. And we're going to read the first one.

Then I'll say a few words about it. This is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, 1 to 7. In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

[2 : 4 1] This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

This is the word of the Lord. There was no place for them in the inn. Earth did not welcome him when he came.

Every Christmas seems to attract a crop of silly stories. It seems to be one of the things that belongs to the season. One which I always remember is one a number of years ago in which actually made the local newspapers.

The headline was, Dottie Vicar says Santa Claus's, at the axles of Santa Claus's sledge, will be red hot if he does what he's alleged to do.

[4 : 07] And he was passionately telling the Christmas service that Santa Claus couldn't possibly exist because of this. I suspect he was a man whom the Lord had not over-endowed with a sense of humor.

Now, he might have got away with this, but unfortunately for him, in his congregation, was the television personality Ulrika Johnson, who, after the service, indignantly told the press, Christmas is about children.

And this Dottie Vicar ought not to have distressed the children by spoiling one of the main Christmas stories. Christmas is about children.

But you know that's not true. Christmas is about a child. After all, to say Christmas is about children is to sentimentalize Christmas. Hitler was a child once.

The recently deceased dictator of North Korea was a child. It's not simply hope because of every child who is born. The hope is because this child, Jesus Christ, the Lord from heaven, was born.

[5 : 22] Now, if you listen to that reading, you must have seen how low-key it is. There's no, there's nothing, there's no glitter, there's no parcels, there's no Christmas trees.

So far, there's no angels. It's so matter-of-fact. And yet, it's obviously an event which happened. If you read the Gospel of Luke, you read the very first verses, Luke says he's telling history.

This is not once upon a time there was a beautiful idea. Once upon a time a mythical person came into the world. This was an event which happened. It happened in a specific place, Bethlehem.

It happened at a specific time when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And it happened at a specific situation, a registration, a census. In other words, Jesus for the Roman emperor, for Quirinius, the governor of Syria, was just another statistic.

From the point of view of the establishment, from the point of view of the red tape of that day, it's just another insignificant family to whom a child has been born who are registering in their native town.

[6 : 38] And yet, behind it all, the eternal God is working out his purposes. Just as he is today, amidst all the politics, amidst the economics, amidst all the troubles of our world, he is working out his purpose.

But there is a deeper meaning. Bethlehem. The city of David. This reminds us of what had been said earlier in Luke. The angel Gabriel came to Mary and said, The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.

Of his kingdom there will be no end. This seemed a crazy promise. David's kingdom had gone for 500 years.

There had never been a king on the throne of David. And yet, what Augustus, Caesar Augustus, did not know, what Quirinius did not know, was that one day he would be the statistic.

He would be the name. Who on earth, apart from ancient historians, would ever have heard of Quirinius, governor of Syria, if he hadn't been involved in this apparently obscure birth.

[7 : 49] This statistic, in a remote stable, would be lord of all. As one of C.S. Lewis' characters says, Once, in our world, there was a stable that had something in it that was bigger than the whole world.

And Mary, this young Jewish girl, had learned that she was to be the mother of the saviour of the world. The hopes and fears of all the years were to come.

Just another statistic, in verses 1 to 5. And just another birth, in verses 6 and 7. Humble beginnings. Humble, not welcomed, not made up, not fettered, not even given normal courtesy.

It's strange, isn't it, that one of the most vilified characters in the whole of the Christmas story is actually never mentioned anywhere. You can search the Bible, but you will find no mention of the innkeeper who turned them away.

We don't even know if it was the innkeeper. You may simply have been a servant. But the point is, that this birth was a truly human birth.

[9 : 04] I say this with awe and trembling. Had you been there at the manger? When Mary gave birth to Jesus, it would have been exactly the same as any other birth.

He was truly human. He was little, weak and helpless. Tears and smiles like us he knew. God became flesh.

God didn't stay away and leagues of super space and simply say he was interested and he cared. He came down. He came to his own. But his own did not welcome him.

Earth did not welcome him when he came. As you'll notice, that carol has contrasting parts. The first part speaks of the child in the manger, the child of salvation.

And the second part speaks of the Lord of all, the mighty Redeemer. And our second reading is both a parallel and a contrast to our first reading.

[10 : 04] Earth did not welcome him was the subject of our first reading. The subject of our second reading is that heaven praised him. And this is Luke chapter 2, verses 8 to 20.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over the flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

And they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you, for you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

[11 : 13] And the angels went away from them into heaven. The shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Now clearly we're moving into a very different atmosphere. The first part of the chapter, verses 1 to 7, almost as if we had been in a darkened room, where we only very faintly and very dimly saw the outline of a manger and a baby lying in it.

[12 : 23] Here it's almost as if the light has been switched on. The light has come and shone behind us, so that we see everything and we see clearly what is happening.

Because while earth did not welcome him, heaven was filled with praise. As we'll see in a moment, that is going to lead to earthly acceptance.

So there is the appearance of the angel of the Lord. This is the third time an angel has appeared. The angel has appeared to Zechariah back in chapter 1 and told him that his wife Elizabeth is to have a child, and this child is to be John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Christ, of the Messiah.

Then Gabriel had come to Mary and told her she was to bear the Savior of the world. This is what's now happening. The glory of the Lord.

Light shone around them, dazzled them, terrified them, because they realized this was something they had never come across before. Blinding light shone around them, and they began to realize something of what was happening.

[13 : 33] The glory of the Lord. The presence of the Lord shone in shining, blinding light, which had happened to the people of Israel long before as they carried the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of the presence of the Lord with them through the desert.

And Gabriel had told Mary something absolutely astonishing. Just as the glory of the Lord shone on the Ark of the Covenant, just as the presence of the Lord was there, Gabriel said, You, Mary, you are going to become the Ark of the Covenant.

You are going to carry the word of the Lord. You are going to bear the Savior of the world. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the house, on earth peace, those whom he is well pleased.

Now you'll notice, we're not given every detail, but we are given enough to understand something of this event.

Verse 15, The shepherd said, Let us go to Bethlehem to see this thing which has happened, the event of the angels, the event of the singing in heaven, and which the Lord has made known to us.

[14 : 53] They were told what this event meant. And you'll notice, this is a universal salvation. On earth, glory to God in the highest.

On earth, peace among those with whom he is pleased. It's also special to the shepherds. To you is born this day. You know, that's true still about the gospel.

The gospel is a universal message. The gospel calls all of us to worship before the Christ who was born, before the Savior of the world. Each of us has to do it individually.

That's the great challenge of Christmas, after all. Not just a time of singing, and a time of festivities, a time of presents. A time of challenge. A time, each one of us must ask, have we welcomed the Christ who was born in Bethlehem into our hearts?

The whole story focuses on this moment. The whole story of the Bible, from the beginning, is focused on this moment. Like an hourglass, where the sand, all the sand, flows through the narrow bottleneck.

[16 : 00] This is what's happening here. All God's purposes focus on this baby in the manger. So, this is what it was all about.

It may have looked, may have looked ordinary, just another birth. Indeed, not just another birth, an obscure, humble, despised birth. But actually, this event caused the whole of heaven to rejoice.

This is what, this is what the, the whole of history had been waiting for. Prophets foretold him, we sang a moment ago, infant of wonder, angels behold him on his throne.

Heaven praised him. And that's still true. Heaven still praises him. What we've got to ask ourselves is this. Are we going to treat him with indifference, the way the establishment did?

Is he just another statistic, another figure in history? Or are we going to accept him the way the shepherds did? The shepherds said one to another, let us go, and they went with haste.

[17 : 04] Their worlds were turned upside down. Nothing would ever be, ever be the same again. They responded in faith, and they told others. They returned, and they, they, who heard, verse 9, 18, all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

This was not something to keep for themselves. This wasn't all, this wasn't all, this wasn't about the shepherds at all. This was, this was for the whole world. Go and tell the message, just as at the end of Luke's gospel, when Jesus rose from the dead, people went and told others.

So the shepherds responded in faith. Have you responded in faith? Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ?

Have you welcomed him into your heart and into your life? Not are you celebrating Christmas? Do you know the Savior? And then Mary, Mary, verse 18, treasured up all these things.

Mary, and pondered them. Mary realized that this was real. Mary realized what Gabriel had told her, however extravagant, however impossible it seemed, however out of the ordinary as it was, this was true.

[18 : 21] This was for real. Nothing is ever going to be the same again. The Son of God, who was one with God, became one of us, and is one of us still.

See, the message of Christmas is not a different message from what we preach throughout the rest of the year. The message of Christmas is the message of the whole year. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior.

And since he's the Savior, that means he's got to go to the cross to die for our sins. That means he's going to rise again. That means that one day he is going to come again, not as a humble stranger in a stable, not as an outcast.

He is going to come in power and great glory. One day you're going to meet him. Every single person in this building, every single person ever born, everyone you know is going to meet him, and he is going to be the judge.

But the good news is he has come to save us from our sins. The good news is we can accept him. We can welcome him as the shepherds did, and we can spend our lives knowing that this gospel is true and telling it to others.

[19 : 37] May God bless each one of us at this time of Christmas. And may indeed this be the time when the Holy Child of Bethlehem will descend to us and become part of our lives.

Let's pray. Almighty God, give us grace to cast off the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light here in the time of this mortal life when our Savior came to visit us in great humility so that on the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may be made like him in his eternal kingdom where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.