

St. John's Reid 2010

In a much cited 2004 study into human well-being, American Psychologists Ed Diener and Martin Seligman wrote:

Although economic output has risen steeply over the past decades, there has been no rise in life satisfaction...and there has been a substantial increase in depression and distrust.

So here's a question: What *exactly* is it that we're celebrating today?

- Where's the 'Joy to the world' - about which ancient Yule-tide carollers trolled?
- Is there anything worth getting excited about in a post GFC world where depression and distrust may appear to have the upper hand?
- Is it 'the season to be jolly' (as every underage busker in and around 'Civic' would have me believe)?

Well, there is an answer to that question and I refer to the gospel of St. Luke - an ancient document (written by a meticulous historian) where the details of the very first 'Christmas' are faithfully preserved.

By taking note of the details in Luke's report, our sense of hope and joy may well be rekindled.

In passing we ought also note that this is not a 'once upon a time story' - it is anchored in history; Caesar Augustus was the Emperor, Quirinius was the governor, and at the behest of the Caesar, a census of the whole Roman empire was ordered - Luke 2:1ff.

And so a flesh and blood Joseph and Mary leave the backwaters of Nazareth in Galilee and return to Joseph's ancestral home of Bethlehem to register.

Nothing particularly interesting so far...apart from the fact that story involves events and people that are real.

Do please note with me v.5.

Joseph went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child

Now given that the baby arrives just after they set up camp in Bethlehem, Mary must have been heavily pregnant.

And given that whole family groups went to their ancestral homes to register, it would have been plain for all to see (all Joseph's friends and relatives) that this *unmarried* couple would soon be parents.

Now in that context the disgrace would have been acute - questions would have been asked;

“If Joseph is not the father then who is?”

You know, one Jewish law determined that an adulteress should be put to death (Leviticus 20:10).

Mary was in an extremely precarious situation.

And perhaps there were whispers behind Mary’s back.

Maybe she was shunned by relatives (a normal course of action in such circumstances).

What we *do* know is that God is working out his purposes in the life of this young unmarried *girl* (the word for ‘virgin’ also means ‘young girl’ - someone around 13 or 14 years of age).

Out of this humiliation and disgrace would come the great rescuer of God’s people.

The angel had said as much 40 weeks earlier,

Mary, you will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus...he will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. Luke 1:32.

And I should point out that such a seemingly unorthodox plan had been on the agenda for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Through the prophet Isaiah God said,

The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel [God with us]”. Isaiah 7:14.

So on the one hand there is suspicion and innuendo, and an *apparent* breaking with all that is conventional and moral and good - and on the other we have God - with intent - rolling out his great rescue plan - a plan that enables people like us to know and enjoy him forever.

Out of confusion and humiliation will come light and salvation.

Note also Luke’s observation that at his birth the baby Jesus is wrapped in ‘cloths’.

'Cloths' does not mean a neo-natal designer piece from *Rug Rats 'R' Us* but strips of material, quite possibly from Mary's own robe or outer garment that had been torn into smaller pieces.

Jesus was wrapped in rags and then he was placed - as you know, in a manger - a rough hewn feed trough for sheep and livestock.

The Christmas cards tend to be quite sentimental about this scene; the adoring parents and the radiant babe are generally surrounded by fat 'lowing' cattle and the manger is located in a well lit, clean barn....the baby awakes, no crying he makes... kind of thing.

Just as the shepherds (to whom I'll return in a moment) lived out in the fields, its highly likely that the manger was nothing more than a raised frame in an open paddock.

It underscores the serious nature of Mary and Joseph's situation; they were desperately poor.

And yet to ones such as these is born (and I quote again the words of the angel to Mary),

One who will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end. Luke 1:32-33.

What a contrast: The eternal king of the universe - the Son of the Most High is born to two (no doubt godly) - but very ordinary people, in squalor and poverty.

It also interests me that God elects to come among us - not in the first instance as a conquering warrior - but as a helpless infant.

The one who is 'Saviour', 'Christ' and 'Lord' (to quote the angel from v.11) is weak, defenceless, and utterly dependent on his child-mother for nurture and protection.

The extent to which God-in-man identifies with our human condition is remarkable, don't you think?

He is 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23) in every sense of that expression; starting out as a human infant and growing to manhood.

He *knew* joy and he *knew* sorrow; he *knew* love and friendship and he *knew* betrayal and abandonment; he *knew* laughter and life and he *knew* bitterness and death.

God with us, do you see?

And then there were the shepherds.

We read,

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:8-11.

And verse 17-18,

When the shepherds had seen him they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who hear it were amazed at what the shepherd said to them.

Now at the time this was written down shepherds - whilst having a noble history in Jewish literature (after all their great king David had been a shepherd-boy) - were to be avoided at all costs.

And that is because they were considered 'unclean'.

They handled dead sheep carcasses; they were in contact with rats and spiders and other ceremonially 'unclean' creatures.

In first century Palestine a shepherd was deemed to be untrustworthy and shiftless.

A shepherd could not give evidence in court of law; a shepherd was certainly not allowed to enter the temple to formally participate in the worship of the God of Israel.

And here's the thing; *with intent* God appoints these outcasts as ambassadors of his Messiah.

Through the shepherds, the good news of Jesus' birth is first proclaimed to all who will listen.

Though rejected by men, these faithful shepherds are afforded an extraordinary privilege by God.

It reminds me of that lovely verse in I Corinthians 1:27, where God very often chooses the seemingly 'foolish' things of this world, the lowly and weak, things and people of 'no account', to accomplish his purposes.

And the paradoxes continue throughout Jesus' life:

- In order to bring us peace with God, he himself is subjected to violence and brutality.
- In order to give us life (that is life in relationship with God) he must first endure death.
- Indeed before he receives his crown (as king of that renewed eternal kingdom) he will go to the cross.

Here then is how the “good news of great joy for all the people” plays out:

In time and in history God comes among us.

God comes among us and immerses himself in our humanness and all that that entails; on the one hand there is fellowship, and celebration, and creativity, and laughter.

And on the other there is humiliation and disgrace, and poverty, and weakness, and betrayal, and innuendo, and confusion, and death.

God comes among us and immerses himself in our humanness - **all of it.**

He understands our condition.

He knows what makes our hearts race and he knows what makes our hearts break.

And what is more he comes among us in order that we might know what it is to be truly human.

For the things that drag us down and hold us back...are symptomatic of sin... and sin prevents us from knowing and enjoying God as we ought (as we were designed).

And that is why the infant in the cradle eventually goes to the cross and to death.

In his death, Jesus absorbs sins’ consequences; judgement and separation from God - for us.

For ordinary people like us:

- for shepherds
- for unmarried teenage mothers
- for people in pain
- for those facing death and decay.

That’s the good news.

There's the joy to the world!

This Christ (this long awaited Messiah from heaven) saves or rescues us from the consequences of sin and invites us to live under his caring rule; his Lordship...so that we might become all that God intended for us to be.

And as he publicly passed through death into the eternity of God's heaven so too will he bring all who trust him into that forever of celebration and joy.

I'm not entirely convinced that Christmas is the *season to be jolly* (as the under-age buskers in and around Civic would have me believe) but is certainly the season - in the midst of all the stuff that life throws up - to reconnect with Him who with intent came among us so that we might know him and enjoy him; truly human, whole, forgiven and dearly loved.

Let me close with a prayer that you may wish to make your own - especially so if you'd like to reconnect with this God who gave his all for you.

Dear Heavenly Father,

I place my life - with its joys and sorrows in your hands.

Thank you that you know me and understand what I feel and what I fear.

Thank you that Jesus - the Christ, came to us and gave his life for me.

I acknowledge him as my Saviour and ask you to help me to live for him as Lord.

Thank you for the joy this brings to the world. Amen.