

## Just an Ordinary Baby?

Luke 2:15-21. Little Cornard

Benefice Service 31.12.17

Well, Christmas is over for another year. And I do have a confession to make. There are a number of times every Christmas when I feel like Ebenezer Scrooge. I will have played too many party games; eaten too many mince pies; had too many late nights. The Christmas story, dare say it, will have become stale; I shall have sung "Away in a manger" for the 25th time. It will have lost its meaning. In my mind I'll start to say, "That child born 2000 years ago? He was just an ordinary baby? What's all the fuss?"

I myself have been responsible for 2 babies. I remember both the births well. At neither birth did I score high marks! At the first all the blood was draining from my face. The midwife took one look at me and told me to leave the room. She was probably right! At the second everything happened so quickly that I made the mistake of asking if it was a false alarm. The firm reply came back, "No, Mr Emerson, it is not!"

They were both ordinary births. Surely it was just the same with this baby born 2,000 years ago. Why all the fuss? What was different about his birth?

Well, he didn't exactly slip quietly into the World. Just look at some of the stir he immediately created. Look at the reactions.

How about the reactions of the shepherds. If we think of shepherds we tend to think of kind and gentle men; genial, ruddy-faced men with amazing dogs running rings round the sheep. Unfortunately 1<sup>st</sup> Century shepherds weren't like that at all. They had the reputation of being very dodgy. They were thought of as thieves, always stealing sheep that weren't theirs.

Angels appear to these people? – surely not. But they did. Not surprisingly these shepherds were "terrified". (If an angel appeared to us we would be too.) The angel told them about this new born baby. Now, in the shepherds' minds a special

baby would be born in something like a royal palace. They didn't want to go there. But the angel went out of his way to put the shepherds at ease, "No, No, this baby is to be found in a mere manger and wrapped in strips of cloth. Just like other babies from other poor families." Realising they were not being asked to go to some grand building, the shepherds were off like a shot to Bethlehem. These rough men were not easily fooled. But they were convinced that something special was happening.

How about King Herod's reaction? Now, he was a complex, brilliant man and in his youth had been a great soldier. He was quite a lad - he'd had 10 wives! But the older he got, the more neurotic he became. If he thought, even his own sons were becoming too close to him or too powerful, he had them murdered. So his reaction was entirely predictable. Wise men coming into town looking for a baby; a future king! – just the sort of news that would make him throw a fit. "Right," he shouts, "All the boys in Bethlehem under 2 are to be put to death.

Interestingly we see that both ends of Jesus' life were filled with violence. At his birth we see this mass murder. 33 years later we see him suffering the most violent death imaginable.

How about Joseph's reaction? Well first, when he learns his teenage wife is pregnant he must have been furious, ashamed, embarrassed. They hadn't even been to bed together and here she was pregnant! Has she been sleeping around? Not until the angel told him the truth was he, sort of, reassured.

How about Mary's reaction? She was amazing. Just a teenager, and yet so calm and accepting - "Let it be to me just as the Lord has said". She took it all in. Totally unflappable.

Such a variety of reactions from such a diverse bunch of people. It all makes the story ring very true. No fake news here! Just an ordinary baby? – I don't think so.

The timing of this baby's arrival was interesting too. Our 1<sup>st</sup> Reading speaks of God sending his son "in the fullness of time". This was the perfect time for Good News to spread. The Romans had united much of the known world under their

government. Travel was easy. And most of the world spoke a common language – Greek. Communication was simple. God’s timing, as always, was impeccable.

You know, speaking of this birth, there must be trillions of planets in this Universe But as far as we know God has only physically visited one of them – this one. The great Bible translator, J. B. Phillips, summed it up. He called our World “The visited Planet”.

To visit someone who is in trouble is still the best thing we can possibly do for them. Letters, emails, texts, phone calls are fine; but to take the time physically to visit that person still beats everything else. A visit shows how much we really do care.

One day a housewife was washing dishes at the kitchen sink after her children had left for school. She looked at a plate. “How many times have I washed this plate? How many times have I dried this plate? How many times will I wash and dry it in the future?” She put the plate down, took her apron off, gathered up some belongings and left the house. That night she called home to tell her husband she was safe. But she said she couldn’t come home again. She continued to call home regularly but wouldn’t let her husband or children know where she was, despite their heartrending pleas. Eventually her husband hired a detective who found her. She was 100s of miles away. She was working as a waitress in McDonalds and living over the shop. Her husband immediately jumped into his car, drove, and found the place where she was staying. He knocked on the door. His wife opened it. She said nothing. She silently packed her belongings and followed him to the car; and they drove home.

Several hours later in the bedroom he asked, “Why didn’t you come home before? We begged you to. Why?” She answered, “I heard your words. But not until you took the trouble to drive all that way for me, to come for me, to bring me home, did I realise how much you loved me”.

That's what Jesus has done for us. He has visited us. He didn't have to come down to Earth. He didn't have to visit. But he did. And he did in order to show how much he loves us. He wants to rescue us; to bring us home.

Let's look at it another way. Suppose you have been selected to take part in Strictly Come Dancing. You've never danced before. You are asked to appear at a dance school where you will receive your first coaching lesson. You get there, change, and nervously enter the door to the studio. The room is empty apart from a middle-aged, overweight man sitting in a corner. He greets you rather stiffly. Worryingly, he admits he has never been a great dancer. But he's learned all he knows from books. He asks you to get into several positions that it's obvious that he couldn't possibly manage himself. Eventually you go home very depressed and disappointed. Next day you email the producers of the programme saying that, sadly, you don't feel up to appearing on the show.

Compare that experience to this. You enter the door of the studio. If you're a woman, you're met by a 25 year old, tall, snake-hipped, bronzed Australian man. He comes straight across to you and says, "Hi, my name is Bruce. I'm the Australian ball room champion. We're going to win this show." With that he puts his arm gently round your waist. He leads you round the room. You've never danced before - but you're dancing now! You can't wait for the next lesson to come round.

If you're a man, you're met by a 22 year old, slim, blond, Croatian girl. She comes straight across. She whispers in your ear, "Hi, my name is Anastasia. I am the European jive champion. We're going to dance, Baby." With that she whisks you off round the room and, for the first time in your life you're dancing!

What a difference between the portly man who simply issues instructions and these wonderful expert dance partners.

You see, if God had not come to Earth we could say to him, "It's all right for you, up there in Heaven, telling us what to do. You've never experienced what we are going through down here". We can't say that now. His son came down. He visited.

He had a poor man's birth. He lived in an occupied land. He died horrendously. And then he conquered death. He's the world champion of life. He knows exactly what we're going through; because he's been through it himself. He offers to be our partner.

How stupid am I at Christmas time to behave like Scrooge! To ask, "What's special about this baby?" God has come to visit. What greater privilege can we have?

To put it in dance terms – we try to dance on our own and we fall on our backsides. We complain to him that we've had so many falls in the past. He offers us a new start. He shows us the right steps. On our own we try again but we fall down once more. He offers to teach us. We reluctantly accept his help. He holds us gently. We start to follow his lead and he says we can forget the past. We are just to follow him. We have some difficult moves to face in the future. But he will be with us every step of the way. He will never leave us or forsake us.

And as we continue to dance with him, as he controls our footsteps, the more confident we become. We feel so foolish that we have never put our trust properly in him before.

He says to everyone, particularly as we enter a new year, "In 2018 will you receive my help? Will you accept the new life I can give you? Will you allow me to lead you? Will you dance with me now, throughout this year, and for the rest of your life?"