

A Sermon Preached at Midnight Mass, 24 December 2012
Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle

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Everybody wants to organise the world for their own purposes. In this evening's gospel we see the Roman emperor by his decree about taxation and registration trying to organise the world for his own purposes, and at the same time we see God acting to organise the world for his greater and saving purposes.

The world witnessed the random power of Rome on display as swarms of people across the empire relocate temporarily for the purpose of being registered, registered so that they can be taxed more efficiently. They relocate temporarily to their home towns, to the places with which their families have a historic connection.

For Joseph this is Bethlehem, the city of King David. David is drawn into Luke's account as much as possible. The historic connection between the birth of Jesus and David includes all of the promises that God made to David. As we read in Psalm 132 for example:

The Lord swore to David a sure oath
from which he will not turn back:
'One of the sons of your body
I will set on your throne.
If your sons keep my covenant
and my decrees that I shall teach them,
their sons also, for evermore,
shall sit on your throne.'

So Joseph and Mary come to a dusty, overlooked town on the far side of the Roman empire but they also come to a town redolent of history and destiny, they come to a town of promises, Joseph makes this journey with Mary who is herself a promise-bearer: one who is literally bearing a promise of God. As the angel has told her earlier in Luke's gospel: 'He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the

throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' (Luke 1. 32-33)

Mary brings forth her first born child. The religious resonance of being the first born goes back at least as far as God's instruction to Moses: 'Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, 'Let my son go that he may worship me.' Exodus 4.22-23) We see it also in the prophet Jeremiah's promise of restoration and comfort:

I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn. (Jeremiah 31.9)

They come to a particular place and they also come at a particular time. In the days of Quirinius the 'time comes' for Mary to give birth. Multiple times intersect: Imperial time - measured out in who rules where, the time of Mary's body which reaches its fulfilment and will not be delayed or denied, and the time of God in which the promises of old are fulfilled.

Earthly and human time and place are opened up. But finally, in this part of Luke's gospel, after Mary gives birth an angel appears to some shepherds. This is an appearance to men a long way from Augustus and Herod and Quirinius. Shepherds were not well regarded. For example the testimony of shepherds was inadmissible in court and some townships refused to let shepherds in. They were unclean by virtue of their occupation: the demands of shepherding meant that they could not observe the requirements of the Sabbath and therefore they were ritually unclean.

But now a thing has happened, and more importantly, God has made it known to them. 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord'. These men who

care for the sheep that will become temple sacrifices witness the end of the need for sacrifice. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews has reminded us, the birth, life and death of Jesus has altered forever the religious experience and meaning of the sacrificial system.

' When Christ came into the world, he said. "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me..." The body of Jesus becomes the place of intersection and interaction. It is also the place where the promises of God come to their fulfilment:"See God, I have come to do your will."

So in the midst of the great world the birth is witnessed by an exhausted girl, an anxious father and perhaps half a dozen fearful and bemused shepherds. There are no angels around the birth scene, the angels are in the field with the shepherds and it is the shepherds who tell Mary and Joseph about the angels. The opening of the heavens and the disclosure of angelic worship establish for the reader that this is a narrative with transcendental dimensions (events in heaven and earth impinge each on the other) The contrast between the angelic glory and the earthly reality is sharp - no wonder Mary turns these things over in her heart, seeking to understand them. Nothing very glorious is suggested by the circumstances of the birth of Jesus. But that is how Luke works, to show how God's faithfulness is worked out in human events even when appearances seem to deny his presence and his power.

And is typical of the public character of Luke's narrative that the shepherds are inspired to 'speak publicly': When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Luke writes of Paul's self-defence before Agrippa: 'After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem

and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance.... Indeed the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am certain that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner. (Acts 26.19-20, 26)

The dusty, overlooked town on the far side of the Roman empire is not a place for deeds done in a corner. It is a place where God does a great and wonderful thing that is located in our human identity. And it is a place where we receive a message of what God has done and an inspiration to share that message as the shepherds did. The message is that nowhere is unimportant or forgotten, everywhere is touched by the power of God.