

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

Luke 2:1-20

We always enjoy hearing the story of the birth of Christ. Our emotions respond instantly to its recital. Everything about it is deathless in its appeal.

When the time arrived for the birth of Christ to take place, as promised by the Heavenly Father and as foretold by the prophets, Caesar Augustus was on the imperial throne in Rome. Wanting and needing more money, he issued a decree that all of the world over which he had control should be enrolled with a view to taxation and perhaps military service. On the basis of this census new taxes were to be levied.

Instead of waiting for the census enumerator to call on each citizen, it was decreed that every man would have to go to the village or city where he was born and be enrolled. Joseph and Mary resided at Nazareth, but their enrolment required them to journey to Bethlehem, which was nearly one hundred miles away by the route which they traveled. In those days when a person traveled by land he rode a donkey or a camel, or he walked. Being a poor man, it is assumed that Joseph walked and that Mary, who was soon to give birth to her first child, rode on a donkey.

For both of them it was a long and tiresome journey. For Mary it was an unusually difficult trip. According to custom Mary's face was veiled as she rode over the winding, uneven trail that connected the little village of Nazareth with the outside world. It is doubtful if there was a single complaint as to her way of life and method of travel as she rode on with her head bowed hoping to reach Bethlehem before her deliverance.

Late one afternoon, as the sun was dropping into the Mediterranean Sea, Joseph and Mary passed Rachel's tomb on the outskirts of Bethlehem, and soon they came to the only inn which the village could claim as its own. Like the average small-town hotel today, the inn was seldom filled with guests. With so many having to return to Bethlehem to be enrolled at this particular time, the inn was filled to capacity.

It was urgent that Mary have a place to rest and to prepare for the birth of her child. No time could be lost. When not even an improvised corner could be found in the inn to shelter and protect the expectant mother, Joseph was almost frantic. Finally, the innkeeper told Joseph that he and Mary might stay in the stable if they desired to do so. As a last resort, Joseph and Mary entered the stable. There she gave birth to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was cradled in a manger "because there was no room for him in the inn."

What a contrast between the stable and the inn! One was for the animals and the other was for people. One was cheerless and comfortless, and the other had the common comforts and conveniences which would minister to the needs of people. One was the place where the Son of God could find shelter, and the other was so crowded that there was no room for Him. The stable has passed into history dignified and glorified by the distinction of being the birthplace of the Lord Jesus, while the inn is without a place of honor on history's pages, but stands as a monument of missed opportunity. The opportunity of sheltering the Christ came to the inn but once. When it was lost, it was gone forever.

The shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night, had the honor and wonderful privilege of being the first to hear the news that Christ was born. These poor, honest and industrious men were stirred profoundly when they heard the sweetest carol ever sung and the most wondrous message ever spoken. They were the only ones who heard the angels sing that night, but today the people of various nations sing,

"Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild;
God and sinners reconciled."

The shepherds felt compelled to go at once and make inquiry. They did not wait until daylight. They acted with great decision and energy. Entrusting their sheep to God's care, they promptly went to see for themselves the good tidings of great joy of which the angels had informed them. Instead of saying, "Let us go and see if this thing is true," they declared, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

Just as there was no room for Christ in Bethlehem's crowded inn, so there is not much room for Him in the kind of world in which we live. We do not deliberately shut out of our lives the Christ Whom God has sent to save us from our sins and to give us eternal life. It is just that our lives are so filled with things, and our interests are so varied and numerous. We do not really mean to shut Him out, but we do it anyway. We reserve the best we have for ourselves and our selfish interests, and we send the Son of God to the stable or elsewhere. We do not deceive anybody when we say that we do not have time to pray, to read God's Word, to attend church services, to perform deeds of kindness and helpfulness for others, and to render some significant service for Christ in and through His church. How much room does Christ have in your thoughts, your reading, your conversation, your pleasures, your work or your life? Give Him His rightful place in your heart and life.

When those pilgrims from various places arrived in the little town of Bethlehem, they did not find any magnificent building with royal surroundings, but they found a lowly Babe lying in a manger, surrounded with the common things which are found in a barn. Those pilgrims not only found Christ in Bethlehem, but hope and joy also. The heights and depths and length and breadth of joy are found in the Babe of Bethlehem. At Bethlehem God reached down through His Son in order to lift people up to heaven. Behold the love displayed there and rejoice. As Christians we should join with the angels in singing:

"Joy to the world! The Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing."