

Sermon for All Saints' Highgate, Sunday, 25 December 2021

God With Us (Luke 2.1-20)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The year 2021 has been some year. We started the year in another lockdown, due to worrying numbers of hospitalisations and deaths from Covid-19. We were restricted in how many people we could meet with, and limited in any travel that we could do. As the year progressed, and the process of vaccination was rolled out across our nation, there was a rise in hopefulness, and a return to greater levels of freedom. Most of us were able to enjoy a summer holiday of some kind, with the lucky ones even getting to travel overseas. Then, towards the end of the year, we've entered into a sinking déjà vu: hugely escalating rates of covid infection, due to the new Omicron variant. This has resulted in new but sensible restrictions coming into place, like the return of wearing masks in shops. And now we face the prospect of further restrictions after Christmas. In recent weeks I've known many more friends contracting the coronavirus than at any stage in the global pandemic. I'm guessing that may be true for you also. It's a sickening groundhog day.

That's something of the backdrop that we've all had to endure in 2021. It's the backdrop, but it's not the story. What's been the story for you this year? If you've started a new job or a new school, or passed significant exams, that's likely to have been the story for you in 2021. If you've become a parent or grandparent for the first time,

that will no doubt have been the story for you this year. If you've lost a close relative, a parent or another important figure in your life, that bereavement will probably have been the story of this year for you. If you've been able to successfully get a new project off the ground, or to fulfil a lifetime's ambition or dream, that will've been the story of your year. All those things will have happened against the challenging backdrop of the global pandemic, but they'll be the things that really mattered to you. The stresses of coping with the coronavirus and its consequences were just the backdrop.

The backdrop for Joseph and Mary wasn't a global pandemic. For them it was a world dominated by the absolute rule of the Roman Emperor, and the occupation of their country by Roman soldiers and a local Roman puppet ruler. The local ruler for them was Quirinius, a Roman soldier and politician with a track record of suppressing rebellious tribes, and defeating threatening warlords. And Quirinius was now tasked with raising taxes from the subject peoples of the Holy Land. Quirinius's first step to achieving this was to call a census. Now making a census was something forbidden under Jewish law. It was therefore a source of deep resentment about the Jewish people. And this was compounded by the fact that everyone had to return to the hometown of their tribe. For Joseph and Mary, this meant travelling by foot many miles from their home in Nazareth in the north, down to Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem. It would've been a hazardous journey, especially for a pregnant woman. Not a journey anyone would've chosen. But it was dictated by their Roman rulers, and they therefore had to obey. That's the backdrop for Joseph and Mary.

But the story for Joseph and Mary wasn't the oppression of their Roman overlords. The story for Joseph and Mary was the safe delivery of their firstborn child. If you're lucky enough to have been a first-time parent, then you'll know something of their experience. I will never forget the joy of seeing my first child, my daughter, Eleanor, when she finally emerged from the womb, more than two weeks overdue. It was truly an overwhelming and deeply emotional experience. And the subsequent early months of her life were both a delight, and totally exhausting. I recall sitting down with Sue one evening, and commenting that it felt like we'd had this child in our lives for about six months – whereas it was actually only six weeks! Life was just so full, with a new-born baby to look after. I'm confident therefore, that for all the backdrop of living under occupation, the story that mattered for Joseph and Mary was that Jesus was born, and was safely in their own hands. Everything else was background noise. [Sing, slowly:]

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.

The words of this beloved Christmas carol remind us that the backdrop of the Christ's arrival is the reality of sin in our world. And the 2019 coronavirus disease is one challenging manifestation of that sin, that fallenness in our world. It affects the whole world, and runs through the whole experience of life. But whilst that sin is the backdrop to our lives, it's not the story that matters.

In the midst of our ongoing global pandemic, we might be wishing that God would come down from heaven in all his glory, and bash the covid virus on the head, and do away with all the other effects of human sin. But the birth of Jesus at Christmas reveals to us that this isn't how God works. God's not primarily in the business of saving us from sin. Sin is just the backdrop. What's revealed to us in the arrival of a tiny new-born infant, born to two working-class Jewish peasants, is God's greatest plan. It's the fulfilment of the biggest story of all: which is to come and be with us in the midst of the messiness of this world. That's what God's always wanted. That's what God reveals at Christmas. God wants to be with us, to be our great companion.

The Christmas story is this: more than anything else, God wants to be with you, and to share in the sorrows and joys of your life. No matter how low you may sink, no matter what highs you may enjoy; no matter how dark things may get for you, nor how exhilarated you may become. The story, revealed in the vulnerable baby in the manger at Bethlehem, is that God wants to be with you in the midst of it all. That's what God wants. That's the big story.

Let us, therefore, be those meek souls who receive him, who receive Jesus into our lives. For then, as the carol promises us, the dear Christ will surely enter in. May it be so – this Christmas, and always. Happy Christmas to you.