

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord God, we are profoundly grateful for the privilege of salvation, which has been won for us by Jesus Christ. Like Him, may we see the world around us with eyes of compassion, may we listen to it with ears of wisdom, and may we feel its pain with a heart of genuine concern. In this way, may we bring Your Kingdom into this troubled world, even through us who are Your people, Lord God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: CHRISTMAS

1. For yourself

After our Christmas celebrations, we often need to give attention to some of the things we have put to one side for a few days. Ask for the Lord's guidance as you do this

2. For your friends and family

Pray for wisdom and love as you deal with Christmas visitors, or as you yourself visit other relatives for this Christmas time

3. For the church and its work

Thank God for the church throughout the world, and pray for its witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Pray for all who celebrate Christmas in difficult circumstances

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for your own country at the end of 2011. Pray for some of the things that have happened and their lasting effects; banking troubles, disasters, political changes, etc.

Meditation

Perception

Is knowing that truth and falsehood, right and wrong
Exist side by side within the world in which we live
and God has made it so

Discernment

Is knowing that evil is personified in Satan
Who rejoices not so much in being wrong and wicked
But in blurring the divisions between the two

Wisdom

Is knowing that the only lead worth following
to find the truth about how right conquers wrong
is the historic path of Christian faith

Power

Is knowing that in the name of Jesus Christ
Satan's destructive illusions and ruinous lies
Fall down before the Cross, and always will

Peace

Is knowing that the keys to eternal liberty and life
Are found in the Holy Spirit, who is God's gift
And the evidence of God's love in Christ, with us

Bible Study

Bible passage – Luke 1:15-20

¹⁵ *When the angels left and went from there to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'*

¹⁶ *So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph with the baby who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they spread the word about what they had been told about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what was said to them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these things and thought about them in her heart.*

²⁰ *The shepherds returned, giving glory to God and praising Him for all they had heard and seen which was just as they had been told.*

Review

There are only a few verses in this passage, but it is a powerful reading, and it shows us how the birth of Jesus was already affecting people. Jesus' presence, even as a child, was used by God to bring out the best in Mary and the shepherds. After the angels left (2:15), the shepherds had a choice, whether to believe what they had seen and heard, or to dismiss it. They chose to set off and find the baby, to verify what they had been told. This was indeed an act of faith. Our passage today illustrates essential faith; it describes the shepherds' faith as they sought to find Jesus (2:16), the faith shown in their testimony to what God had done (2:17), the faith of Mary who '*treasured all these things ... in her heart*' (2:19), and lastly, faith shown in worship and praise (2:20). Even as a baby and unable to communicate with people directly, Jesus inspired faith in the people around Him.

It is easy to understand why the shepherds wanted to discover the truth about what they had seen. The vision of the angelic host of God telling them of the birth of the Messiah was remarkable, but they needed to know whether it was the truth, and there was an element of risk attached to their search. Leaving the sheep during the night left them open to the charge of neglect, and if found negligent, they could have lost their jobs. Nevertheless, they accepted the danger and found Jesus quickly enough. Yesterday, we encountered one theory about how the shepherds may have found Jesus, which was that they knew the 'cave' where Jesus was born as the place where the sheep were kept during the winter months. We should only sit lightly to such theories however, because the Bible only says that they pursued Jesus with 'haste'. Their urgency is an example of faith to all who seek to know the truth about God and the news of His Son Jesus.

The point at which the shepherds found Jesus was critical to their faith. Yet again, we have to put aside our mental pictures of the shepherds at the manger, because Luke just tells us no more than that they found Jesus '*lying in a manger*' (2:16). Given what the angels said, it is still reasonable to picture them worshipping Jesus. After this, and with their faith verified, the shepherds '*spread the word*' (2:17) about Jesus. Their testimony to God's work would have been very basic; they had seen a vision on the hillside at night, been told of the birth of the Messiah (2:10-14), and verified this prophecy with their own eyes (2:17). People were amazed at what they heard from the shepherds (2:18), but we are told no more. Luke does not say that people believed in Jesus because of this testimony. Could it be that social prejudice against shepherds meant that people marvelled yet did not take their word seriously?

In complete contrast to the admirable public testimony of the shepherds, Mary famously '*treasured all these things ... in her heart*' (2:19). This is only a small phrase in the Bible, but it is powerful; and here at the beginning of the Gospel we are told of the great value of storing up knowledge of what God has done. Mary had experienced so much already, and everything we have read about Mary and the birth of Jesus in Luke 1 and 2 is worthy of a scholarly thesis today! Yet by thinking about these things, Mary became a great treasure store for the church. An early tradition of the church tells us that after Jesus' death, Mary was instrumental in telling the early Christians the truth about Jesus from the earliest years. It is almost certain that Luke gained his information about these events from Mary herself.

At the beginning of Luke 2, the story of Jesus' birth was full of uncertainty; would Jesus be accepted in the world? Through God's revelation to the shepherds on the hillside and their visit to Joseph, Mary and Jesus, the situation was transformed into one of faith and worship (2:20).

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- The faith of the shepherds
- The faith of Mary
- Worship and praise

Notes on the translation of the passage

V16 'in haste'

The Greek word used here ('speudo') means 'as quickly as possible', indicating a degree of urgency. This word is found a number of times in Luke's writings (see Luke 19:5 and Acts 20:16, 22:18 etc.), and it is used in a similar way to the word 'immediately', which is characteristic of Mark's Gospel.

V17 'spread the word'

This Greek word 'rhema' does indeed mean 'word, utterance or saying'. However, it is used to translate the Hebrew 'dabar', which can mean either 'word' or 'thing'. For this reason, some bible versions translate this verse '*made known what had been told them*', with the emphasis on the event rather than the spoken word.

V19 'and thought about them in her heart'

Other translations:

'and pondered them in her heart' (NIV)

'pondering them in her heart' (English standard)

The Greek word here is 'symballo', meaning 'throw together'. When speaking about someone's thoughts, however, the idea of this verb is that someone throws together all manner of thoughts and opinions and organises them in the mind. This word is usually used of either scholarly activity, or of military consultation concerning battle.

The faith of the shepherds

For the shepherds, it must have been an incredible few hours. They had seen angels giving glory to God and telling them of the Saviour's birth, but as with all revelations of God, this had to be checked. The shepherds had to leave their flocks in order to do this and placed their livelihoods at risk in so doing. Pursuing the truth is not a merely cerebral matter, as many people think today, believing that the only truth we can find is philosophical or intellectual. The important truths of life are found when people search for them, live by them and prove them. This is clearly demonstrated by the shepherd's hurried action in coming down from the hills in the middle of the night to try and find the evidence of the birth of a child.

Checking out facts is important, and later on in Scripture, this principle of checking out a revelation from God becomes an important principle for the church. John says in his letter, '*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world ...*' (1 John 4:1f.). The first measure of the shepherd's faith was their urgent desire to check out the truth of what they had been told by God, not by debating it, but by being obedient. They did what God told them to do through the angels, and went to find Jesus.

It is worth debating whether the famous story about the visitation of the angels was passed down because the shepherds told other people about it, or because Mary remembered what the shepherds had said to her because it coincided with what she already knew by revelation from the angel Gabriel (1:28:f.). I suggest that it is more likely to have been passed down by Mary, not just because (as we have seen above) this was more likely according to church tradition, but because Mary was in a position to verify the truth of the message (2:19). Faith is encouraged when people come together to share their experience of God, and find that they have been told the same thing. God is surely at work when His revelation is consistently given to different people.

We are told that after the shepherds found the baby, they immediately began to tell others about what had happened to them (2:17). They were not ashamed to tell everyone about what they had seen and proved with their own eyes! In this way, they demonstrated a second important attribute of faith, the desire to tell others about what they had seen and experienced. We can only imagine that they witnessed to the people they knew, the poorer and lower classes of Judaism; servants, slaves and maid servants. At some point of time they must have realised that they still had jobs to do, and decided to return to the fields to see if their flocks were safe before there was trouble. Verse 20 clearly says that the shepherds returned from whence they came, but now '*giving glory to God and praising Him ...*' (2:20). What a story! God Himself had revealed to them the Saviour of the World!

The faith of Mary

Mary's thoughtfulness stands in complete contrast to the evangelical zeal of the shepherds and their focus on the events they had witnessed. The shepherds were thrilled and vocal in their excitement (2:17,18), but Mary had just given birth and was tired and more thoughtful. Luke's description of Mary indicates that she kept quiet and reflected on what had happened (2:19). We should remember that before she conceived Jesus she had received a revelation from the angel Gabriel concerning His future (1:32-33), and what had been told her was of great importance.

Mary had experienced the amazing visitation of Gabriel to tell her she would have a child by supernatural means, and this had been verified through her visit to Elizabeth. Undoubtedly, she had to work out her relationship with Joseph, who by the grace of God (see Matthew 1&2) remained faithful to her despite all personal risk, and she had endured the journey to Bethlehem for the census and the birth of her child, in circumstances she can hardly have imagined. Now, she found herself visited in the midst of her precarious personal circumstances (see the study for Luke 2:1-7) by an excited group of shepherds who said they had a vision of God confirming exactly what Mary had been told by Gabriel; her son was Jesus, the Messiah! How much more was it possible for one person to experience in a short space of time?

There is much debate about the role of Mary in the life of Jesus and also in His death and resurrection, and the life of the early church. Here at Jesus' birth, she seems to be totally focussed on Jesus, as we might expect of a mother after her first birth, moreover, do we not expect mothers to remember things that happen at the birth of their children? In later years, Mary's role in the life of Jesus is more uncertain. There appears to have been some friction between Jesus and his family, including his mother, on a number of occasions (see Matthew 12:4, 13:55, 19:29 etc). But when Jesus was on the Cross, we are given a glimpse of Jesus' love for His own mother, in making arrangements for the disciple John to look after her in her old age (John 19:25-27).

Strong church traditions however, indicate that Mary observed a great deal of what happened to her son throughout His life, but after He died, she spoke openly to the early Christians to teach them about Jesus from her own firsthand experience. She was an essential witness to the birth, life and death of Jesus, who fulfilled the promise given to her by the angel Gabriel (1:28f.) Without her knowledge and experience, we suspect that we would not have a number of important and significant stories of the life of Jesus and we cannot but admire the faith of one who 'kept these things' in her heart for so long, in faith that God would one day use this treasury of godliness.

Worship and praise

Ultimately, true faith is shown through worship and praise. No one can read chapter one of Luke without being caught up in the sense of wonder and awe at the work of God to bring His Servant and Messiah into the world, preceded by John the Baptist, and the story takes place within the private lives of a few families in occupied Israel. At the beginning of chapter 2, we are thrown into the different, more dangerous world of the Roman Empire. It is a world of taxes, of subservient peoples having to travel the length of a country just to register for those taxes, and the birth of a child happening in the midst of the general hubbub of life. Yet now, the picture has turned around completely again, and we find ourselves reading about the glorious work of God that merits our worship and praise. God is Lord of history and is in control of all events, even though it may seem otherwise, and the child born in poverty in the midst of the brutal world of Roman occupation is God's child; he is His Son, who will change the world completely. Indeed, in three hundred years, the followers of Jesus, by the grace of God, would change the face of the Roman Empire itself.

The whole opening of Luke's Gospel therefore demonstrates to us the power of praise. The Messiah is born into a dangerous world, but Luke finds within the lives of ordinary people and the angelic hosts of heaven such praise and worship that rises above worldly concerns. Whether or not the shepherds were believed, their worship of God for the coming of the Messiah was the first such worship given on earth and must have been music in heaven. Mary's treasury of all that happened was also a form of praise and worship, perhaps the only appropriate form of worship and praise for one exhausted by all she had endured, but still of incomparable worth.

One of the important messages of the 'Christmas' story is that the worship and praise of God on earth is a powerful testimony to the essential truth of our world. God has made it and He has redeemed it, and He has made all people and given us a means for our redemption through His Son, Jesus. People are fulfilled in their humanity when they accept this truth about God and turn to Him in worship and praise.

Discipleship

Application

It may not have occurred to many people that the birth of Jesus and the story of the shepherds is a story about faith; faith that is active and pursues the truth, faith that perseveres and ultimately triumphs despite the frailty of human life, and faith that shows itself in worship and praise. Some of these truths about faith are obvious from the story of the shepherds, some from the story of Mary, and mostly from both Mary and the shepherds. Luke was able to bring out the importance of faith without using the word itself, but telling the story of ordinary people responding to God's extraordinary work in their midst. Real faith is little different to this today.

We would like to know more about what happened to the shepherds; whether their witness was believed, or whether they met Jesus in later life and recognised Him, saying 'I was there at your birth!' We would like to know more about Mary and her life bringing up Jesus with Joseph and then having a family. Did Joseph die young, as the early church believed? Was Mary a leading light in the early church, responsible for much genuine teaching, and a significant woman in the life of the church while it perhaps struggled with issues of male domination, due to the prevailing culture of the day? We will not find answers to these questions in Scripture, but we find some elusive hints to these questions within the earliest of church traditions, as written down by Christian leaders and scholars in the second century AD, barely a hundred years after Jesus died.

What is undisputable is that the faith spoken of here by Luke has become the faith of the God's people, the church. In His life and teaching, Jesus gradually revealed the truth about the need for people to show trust and faith in Him and in God. Eventually, the famous evangelists and leaders of the church wrote down what God revealed to them about faith, and we now have those writings within our New Testament Scripture. Much has been written down about faith, but in Luke's Gospel, it starts with faith in God for sending His Son, Jesus, as a child. He was the son of God and the son of Mary and Joseph, real people in real history doing the real work of God in our world. The story asks us to believe that this is true, and live by it.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss how you think that the shepherds may have found Jesus in the crowds of people in Bethlehem.
2. What response would the shepherd's story receive in Bethlehem that night? What does the shepherds' story mean to God's people today?
3. What does this passage of Scripture teach you about faith and how can you exercise faith like Mary and the shepherds?

Discipleship challenges

- *How can you tell the story of Jesus in a way that can help people believe that this is true? How can God's people witness to the truth of this story today? Discuss this with others in your church, because this is the beginning of evangelism.*
- *Take time to consider whether the story of Jesus birth has changed you in any way. Should it change you, and if it has not, why not? Discuss this with a friend.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus; grant us peace as we rest in You, grant us faith as we live for You, and grant us security in knowing that You will always be there for us when we need You. We praise You Lord Jesus Christ; grant us the security and peace we need to live a life of faith. AMEN
