

THE PROMISE

THE PROMISE INCARNATE

Paul Goffin

The Baby

Why should we take particular note of this birth, babies have been born every day since the human race began? This birth was unique because the baby who was born was not just human but also divine: God Himself. Jesus of Nazareth was God made man, God Incarnate. Jesus was not just a great teacher, moral philosopher, miracle worker or leader, the world has seen these before. He was, and is, God. This is what separates Christianity from all other religions and many cults: they do not accept the uniquely divine status of Jesus. This is so important that John begins his gospel by proclaiming who Jesus is, so that there can be no doubt. John refers to Jesus as “the Word” because He was bringing the good news of salvation.

1. “In the beginning the Word already existed” (1:1) The word is eternal: before things began He already was.
2. “The Word was with God” (1:1) the word has personality and stands in relationship to God the Father.
3. “And the word was God” (1:1) The Words deity is proclaimed, he is not a created being.
4. “God created everything through Him, and nothing was created except through Him” (1:3) Jesus created everything that exists in the universe.
5. “The Word gave life to everything that was created” (1:4) Life only exists because it was given by God. Created things do not have life in themselves, it must be given to them.
6. “and His life brought life to everyone” (1:4) This is the Word revealing, showing men that God exists.
7. “So the Word became human and made His home among us” (1:14) God became human to live on the Earth, among men.

The Christmas message rests on the staggering fact that the child in the manger was God. If Jesus had not become human then the cross could not have happened, and our sins could not have been taken away by His work of atonement. (Philippians 2:6-8)

The Father and Mother

Joseph and Mary were an exceptional couple. Before the birth of Jesus they were betrothed to be married, but before the wedding took place Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. This was a major disgrace at the time, being an unmarried mother was not an acceptable state to be in. Joseph too was in an unenviable position when he heard that his wife to be was already pregnant. However he was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her, so decided to break the engagement quietly. Then an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him of God’s plan, and he accepted this. Mary too had received a visit from an angel, to tell her that she would become pregnant. She was potentially at risk of being stoned in this situation (Deuteronomy 22:23). The way that they both accepted the path that God had called them too shows great faith and great courage, they were risking a lot in doing God’s will.

Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem for the census, as he was a descendent of King David. We do not know how pregnant Mary was at this time, or how long they spent in Bethlehem, but whilst they were there the baby was born. In Middle Eastern culture it is unlikely that they would have had nowhere to stay in Bethlehem, especially as this is where Joseph’s family came from and Mary had relatives living nearby. There may have been no lodging available, as Luke says, but they would have been taken into the home of one of the inhabitants, it would have been a disgrace to the whole community if they had not. In houses at that time the animals came in for the night, there were no separate barns, and the manger would have been inside the house. Thus Jesus was born, wrapped in strips of cloth, and laid in the manger, as all other babies born would have been.

The Shepherds

Shepherds were near the bottom of the social ladder at this time. Despite this an angel appeared to a group of them outside Bethlehem and told them that the Messiah had been born, and told them where He could be found. The shepherds realised that Jesus was to be found in an ordinary house, not a palace, and went to see Him. God chose witnesses to this miracle that society itself would not have chosen, common people, a pattern that occurs throughout the gospels. Jesus came to earth for all classes of men and the shepherds demonstrate this.

The Magi

So far the story has involved only Jews, but Jesus came to Earth for gentiles as well, and the story of the Magi illustrates this. The wise men had seen the star that foretold the birth of Jesus and they came to Jerusalem to seek Him. It is likely, from the gifts that they brought with them, that they had travelled from Arabia as frankincense and myrrh are obtained from trees in Southern Arabia. We are not told how many of the magi there were but they travelled to Bethlehem, found Jesus and worshipped Him and gave Him gifts. This is highly significant because the story shows that God had a plan for the gentiles, and that this plan involved Jesus. God was going to provide a means of salvation for all men, both Jews and non-Jews, through Jesus. This was, and is, a radical concept. God has spoken to the Jews through the prophets for hundreds of years, but now the message of salvation was to go to the whole world, through a child born as a Jew, Jesus Christ. Later in the New Testament we see this revelation unfold, but we must remember that spreading the gospel to the gentiles was not plan B for God, it was always plan A.

King Herod the Great

The Christmas story now takes on darker shades. Herod was a complicated character. Racially he was Arab, from an Arab tribe in the south. He was religiously Jewish. Culturally he was Greek, and Greek was his first language. Politically he was Roman, as Rome was the ruling power at this time. He married ten women in his lifetime, and murdered his favourite wife as he was suspicious that she was not politically loyal. He also had two of his sons strangled as he saw them as political rivals. He was a violent man, interested in maintaining his power by whatever means he could. When the magi arrived seeking Jesus he knew that this could be a danger to his power and responded violently when the magi did not return to tell him where Jesus was, and ordered the murder of all boys under the age of 2 around Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph had been warned in a dream that this would happen and so they fled and took refuge in Egypt.

Whilst Herod was an exceptionally violent ruler this does demonstrate that following Jesus means that we will have new responsibilities and loyalties, that may need to take precedence over the social situation around us, or our societal norms. We may end up in opposition to things that are happening around us as we stand for what God's standards are, rather than those of the world. There may be a price that we have to pay personally. The Christmas story is one of joy and hope for the future, but it does have its costs as well.

The events of Christmas, all those years ago, changed the world for ever. God chose to become a man, empty Himself and become humble to bless us all as human beings, His own creation. Enjoy the celebrations and the season, but try not to lose sight of the real meaning of the Incarnation.

You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

References:

Knowing God by J.I. Packer

Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes by Kenneth E. Bailey

Hidden Christmas by Timothy Keller