

HANDLE WITH KINDNESS

Christmas in the Innkeeper's Hands

Text: Luke 2:1-7

What would you consider the preeminent Christian virtue? I know our immediate response would probably be **love**. Let me nuance the quality of love and shade it toward **humility**. I believe that **humility** is the preeminent virtue of the Christian faith. Why would I say this? It is because of the gift that Christianity offers to the world. The great British Christian thinker, C. S. Lewis was asked, "What is unique about Christianity?" In other words, what sets the Christian faith apart from all other faiths? Without a moment's hesitation, Lewis said, "O, that's easy. One word: GRACE." GRACE is the gift that Christianity offers to the world. If grace is God's undeserved favor toward an ungrateful humanity, then **humility** is the result in those of us who know we are in need of grace.

One of the angles from which we could look at the Christmas story is how God uses power. God Himself comes to us in humility. The core of the human problem is the opposite of humility. Pride rules the human heart. At its heart pride is competitive. It is one-upmanship. It is not enough to be rich, smart or good looking, we must be richer, smarter or better looking than someone else. Therefore power passed through the grid of pride leads to the pursuit of privilege, position and rank over others. We are constantly scrambling to be on top, posturing to look better than we are.

This is why the Christmas story is so shocking. God comes to us, quite frankly, in weakness. God slips on to the human stage in the form of a helpless baby not wrapped in silk sheets surrounded by royalty and splendor but in the most ordinary and non-descript surroundings imaginable.

As we come to the story of humble birth of Jesus, we have already been informed by Matthew and Luke about the identity of the child in Mary's womb. In Matthew's gospel, the angel told Joseph to name this child, Jesus, for he would save his people from their sins. In addition, Matthew adds the title, Immanuel, which means "God with us." In Luke's gospel, the angel Gabriel shocked Mary with the news that she would carry in her womb the Son of the Most High God, who would sit on the throne of David (in others words this is the long awaited Messiah) and that His kingdom would never come to an end.

With the birth of this royal Son, we might expect great fanfare. But where are the trumpeters dressed in regal garb, accompanied by the royal birth announcement, "Hear Ye, Hear Ye, at midnight on 0 AD, God the Son was born to the proud parents of Mary and Joseph"?

Yet Christmas is about how God displays his power in humility.

The Creator God, the One who called all things into being, came to us in weakness.

The One who said, Let there be light and there was light, came to us in the form of a dependent and vulnerable baby.

The One who moves all things after the counsel of his will, who causes human sovereigns to do His bidding, slips on to this planet in obscurity.

The Royal One before whom Isaiah quaked, entered into the womb of a teenage peasant girl.

The Christmas story is about how God intends to break our hearts with his overwhelming grace. The power of grace stoops to where we are.

Let's see how Luke combines both the Sovereignty of God over history with the weakness of God as he enters the human story.

The Historical Setting for the Christ's Birth (v. 1-3)

Luke is concerned to put the birth of Jesus in a specific historical context. I believe he does so for two reasons: First, He wanted us to know that Jesus occupied time and space as a real flesh and blood being in history. Secondly, Luke wants us to know the Lord moved through the human potentates to accomplish His purposes. **"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria). And everyone went to his own town to register" (Luke 2:1-3).**

We tend to divide historical epochs based upon the rule of the reigning monarchs. Caesar Augustus was the first and, considered to be, the greatest of all the Roman Emperors. As the grand nephew of Julius Caesar, he ruled from 27BC to 14AD. He expanded Roman Empire to all the Mediterranean world and established the Pax Romana (the peace of Rome) for the next 250 years. The Roman boot was on the neck of the known world. That's worldly power. We are told that Quirinius was governor of Syria, a Roman province in which Judea, the biblical land was located. We know from both Matthew and Luke's account that Herod the Great was still in power at the time of Jesus' birth. When the Gregorian calendar was established, we didn't have all the historical records we currently do. We now know that Herod died in 4BC, which means Jesus was most likely born somewhere around 6BC. I guess this means that Jesus was born six years before he was born.

Regardless of the accuracy of our timetable, Luke is saying, Jesus is not a myth, meaning, **"a person having only imaginary or unverifiable existence"**, nor was he a

legend. No, Jesus was a flesh and blood being who occupied time and space in a particular era, with a real story and a real history.

But for Luke the most important reason for his historical coordinates is that God used Caesar Augustus to fulfill His purposes. The title Augustus means “exalted one”. Caesar was declared by the Roman Senate to be divine. I like the way Bruce Larson sums up this hubris, “At his (Caesar’s) funeral, his mourners comforted themselves with belief that he was a god and therefore immortal. The man believed to be a god intercepted in time and space the God who became a man.”

Caesar issued a decree for a census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire. We know from historical records that this was required every 14 years. We have archeological records of one such declaration from Egypt. “Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt orders: Seeing that the time has come for the house to house census, it is necessary to order all those who have any cause whatsoever are residing outside their districts to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census, and may also diligently attend to the cultivation of their allotments.” Allotments was a euphemism for the taxes they were required to pay. What is the old expression: Nothing is certain but death and taxes. The reason for the census was two-fold: Establish the taxes people owed and determine those who were eligible for military service. The Jews were exempt from military service, but not from paying taxes.

Yet, the Lord had another purpose as the One who controls the rudder of history. The Lord’s plan was to fulfill the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in the town of David, Bethlehem. David’s family was from Bethlehem. Though Jerusalem became known as the city of David, the family registry for King David’s descendants was kept in Bethlehem.

The Journey to Bethlehem (v. 4)

The story of the God-man’s humble birth continues with the travels that Joseph and Mary made from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem. “So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee of Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David” (Luke 2:4) Well, that journey was easy, hardly took any time at all! What Luke covers in a few words, his first readers would have understood was an arduous and dangerous task for a man traveling with a pregnant woman, most likely riding side-saddle on the back of a donkey.

You can see from the map on the screen that the trip was approximately 90 miles from just below the Sea of Galilee in the north along the Westside of the Jordan River, avoiding the direct route through forbidden Samaria. Riding with a pregnant woman in undulating terrain meant they could cover about 10 miles a day. If this was winter time, one archeologist said the weather would have been like New Jersey. “It’s in

the 30's during the day, and raining like heck. It's nasty, miserable." Unpaved, hilly trails and nasty weather were only a small part of the hazards to be faced. The woods were full of predatory animals such as lions and bears, and if they didn't get you, bandits and robbers would attempt to do so. Thus Joseph and Mary probably traveled in some type of caravan for their protection.

There were no Holiday Inns, nor Travel Lodges along the way. Travelers brought with them all of their provisions (food, water and clothing), and anything resembling an inn was primarily set up for the beasts of burden. An innkeeper provided a stall off of a main courtyard to house and feed the animals, and a fire to provide warmth. Otherwise, you would wrap yourself in a woolen cloak to keep yourself warm at night.

The Shame of their Marital Circumstance (v. 5)

If this form of travel was not humbling enough, what about the marital circumstances that surrounded the birth of Jesus? "He [Joseph] went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child" (Luke 2:5) Mary is an unwed mother to be. Jesus was born in shame. When Joseph gets the word that his betrothed is already with child and they have not consummated their relationship, of course, his immediate and only thought is that Mary has cheated on him.

The marriage customs were quite different than what we are used to. There were essentially three stages to marriage:

1. **Engagement:** Mary and Joseph had not been dating and then fallen in love as we are used to. They were most likely promised to each other as children through an arrangement made by their parents or a matchmaker.
2. **Betrothal** or as Luke says, Mary was **pledged** to be married to Joseph as teenagers: A year prior to their actual marriage, the engagement was officially ratified through betrothal. This was a one year waiting period that was a binding as marriage, but it did not come with the privileges of the marriage bed. Mary and Joseph were known as husband and wife but they did not live together. Betrothal could only be terminated by divorce, which Joseph contemplated, until he was informed of the miraculous conception of Mary's child. If the husband died during this period the woman was called a "virgin who is a widow."
3. **Marriage:** The third stage was the actual marriage ceremony and celebration that followed. This was considered to be the happiest day or actually week in the life of a married couple. A Jewish couple would not go on honeymoon, but invited the guests to come and stay with them for a week. In an otherwise dower life for a poor peasant couple, this was time of feasting and rejoicing, music and gala procession. The rabbis declared, "All in attendance to the bridegroom are relieved of all religious observance

(fasting) which would lessen the joy." We don't know whether Mary and Joseph ever got to celebrate in this fashion.

We do know from a later reference from the religious leaders with whom Jesus tangled, that the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth must have been used against him to smear his reputation. When Jesus questioned whether the Pharisees were true spiritual descendants of Abraham, they pulled out their trump card, "We are not illegitimate children", they protested. As if to imply, "like you are."

Jesus was born in disgrace.

The Birth at Bethlehem (v. 6-7)

If life hadn't been difficult enough, the actual circumstances of Jesus' birth were not fit for a king. "While they were there [in Bethlehem], the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:6-7) The first thing we have to do is get out of our minds these lovely, idyllic ceramic crèches that we all have in our homes. I chuckle every time I sing the second verse of *Away in the Manger*: "The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes..." Really?

The latest scholarly thinking is that Jesus was not born in a stable cut from a hillside cave, but most likely in an overcrowded home. Based upon the word that Luke uses for inn, this is probably best translated "guest room." The TNIV catches this when it says, "there was no guest room available to them." There is a much more common word for inn which is used by Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan recorded by Luke, where the Samaritan takes the injured man to a nearby inn. Given that the population had swelled in Bethlehem, the guest rooms were all full. A common home of a peasant family, would be one room with an elevated living area that sloped toward the end which then dropped down. At night some of the cattle would be brought inside with the manger or cattle trough either cut into the floor or was free standing made of wood.

Luke's main point was that there was no room in the guest house. Jesus was born in the midst of crowded and noisy surroundings, at best sharing a space with another family. His point is that even in a hospitality society, Jesus was even barely given notice. Who would have recognized anything distinctive about this couple giving birth at the end of this journey? John captures Luke's intent in the prologue to his gospel, "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:10-11).

With a subtle, succinct and stark narrative Luke describes the ordinary and yet arduous way that the Son of the Most High God came into the world.

Why did Jesus come to us in humility and obscurity? I believe that God's intent was to win our affection from us. He came to reveal his grace in a way that wooed us and invited us in. He valued our freedom of choice and made room for us to be drawn to Him.

The 19th Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, used a parable to capture the dilemma in the way God would put his love on display. How does God reveal Himself to us without crushing us? How does God display his brilliance and majesty without overwhelming us? Kierkegaard addressed these questions in a parable of a prince who falls in love with a peasant maiden. The prince first thinks to bring her to his castle so that he can woo her. Plan B is to go to her humble cottage accompanied by his chariots, soldiers, and horses. But he realizes that neither approach would be fair. How could she but help be dazzled by his princely splendor? So he resolves to cast off all royal advantage, dons the garb of a poor woodsman and proceeds to her home to plead his cause.

The apostle Paul captures this divine humility in an early hymn of the church: *"⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:5-8)*

In the Christmas story we already see the foreshadowing of the ultimate act of humility that Jesus bore on the cross. He was born in obscurity and died a hideous death. The late Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary General of the United Nations, has written, *"How proper it is that Christmas should follow Advent. For him who looks toward the future, the manger is situated on Golgotha, and the cross has already been raised in Bethlehem."*

Jesus came to us in this humble fashion because He wanted to break our hearts in grace; he wanted for us to choose him in love rather than in fear. Harry Reasoner, the former CBS newsman of a generation ago, captured the wonder of Christmas, *"If Christmas is the anniversary of the Lord of the Universe in the form of a helpless baby, it's quite a day."*

People are afraid of God (and angels) and standing in very bright light. But everyone has seen babies and almost everyone likes them. So if God wanted to be loved as well as feared, he moved correctly here. And if he wanted to know people, as well as rule them, he moved correctly. And so it comes beyond logic. It's what a bishop called divine insanity. It is either a falsehood or it is the truest thing in all the world. It

is the story of the great innocence of God the baby. And it is such a dramatic shot to the heart, that if it is not true, for Christians, nothing is true."

God's grace is displayed in overwhelming humility in order to crack open the fortress of pride that resides in us. This is the theme of Victor Hugo's classic book and musical drama of the same name, *Les Miserables*. At the beginning of the story we meet the main character Jean Valjean. He is an embittered man. He has just been released from prison after serving 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister's starving family. To make matters worse he must carry a "yellow card" that identifies him as an ex-convict. As it would today, it makes it difficult to find a job or even a place to live. But he is fortunate because through the kindness of the Bishop, the Christ figure in the story, to be invited to stay in the Bishop's residence. But Jean Valjean is trapped in the prison of his own pain and decides he can take justice in his own hands. He repays the Bishop's kindness by stealing the silver cutlery. Valjean doesn't make it very far until he is picked up by the police and taken back to the scene of the crime. Valjean had told the police that the Bishop had given this to him as a gift, which, of course, they didn't believe. The police ask the Bishop if this is true. Of course, Valjean cringes waiting for justice to drop on him. He can't believe his ears, when he hears the Bishop say that he had indeed given him the silver cutlery and then adds, "Yes, but I gave you the candlesticks too...why didn't you take them along with your cutlery."

It was this unnatural grace that would finally get to Valjean and change his life. Hugo writes, "In opposition to this celestial tenderness he summoned up pride: the fortress of evil in man. He dimly felt the priest's pardon was the hardest assault, the most formidable attack he had ever sustained; that his hardness of heart would be complete if it resisted this kindness; that if he yielded he would have to renounce the hatred with which the acts of other men had for many years filled his soul; that this time, he must conquer or be conquered."

The Bishop said to Jean Valjean, "I have bought your soul for God".

Jesus came in humility to buy our souls for God. Christmas is about the extent to which God will go to demonstrate his love for us.

So God the Son, knelt before his disciples and washed their feet.

The Son of Man, said, "I came not to be served but to serve and give my life as a ransom (payment) for many" (Mark 10:45).

"Though He was by nature God, He counted equality with God something to be grasped, he made Himself nothing" (Phil. 2:6).

Someone has defined humility as not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less. When we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed with the truth that our lives have been bought with a price; we have been purchased for God, then we will think of ourselves less, while we are in awe of mystery of this divine insanity.

I am going to ask you now in quiet to pray with me and see if we can welcome into our hearts the gift of grace that is the assault on our pride.

Jesus, we see you on bended knee before us, ready to wash our feet. We sense our unworthiness, we want to push you away knowing how undeserving we are. We know the story of our lives, the regrets that we would love to rewrite, and yet with full knowledge of it all, there you are before us saying, "Let me wash you, and make you clean." Will you let Jesus love you? Will you let him embrace you? He has made this journey for you and for me.

While still in prayer hear these words of J. I. Packer, "It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the profoundest and most unfathomable depths of Christian revelation lie...the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wiggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. And there is no illusion and deception in this: the babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation."

Amen. 0

HANDLE WITH KINDNESS

Christmas in the Innkeeper's Hands

Text: Luke 2:1-7

Handling Christmas (Part 4)

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What impresses you about God's humility in the Christmas story?
2. Why might it be important for Luke to establish the historical context of Jesus' birth? (see Luke 1:1-4)
3. How did the Lord use the census with the Roman Empire to accomplish his purposes?
4. In what terms does Luke describe the humble circumstances of Christ's birth?
5. So the big question is...why? Why didn't the Lord God enter this world with all the fanfare of the Lord of the Universe? What was the reason for his humility?
6. How does God's display of grace in humility conquer the pride of the human heart? How does the reality of God coming to us on bended knee impact you personally?