



# Christmas Day

## Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 25 December 2021

### READINGS

Isaiah 52: 7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1: 1-4, (5-12); Luke 2: 1-20

## Christmas

I have always been fascinated by the historical nature of Jesus' birth and infancy narratives. Our Gospels give us different accounts of his birth. Each year we read either from the Gospel of John or Luke where we get various accounts of how the Messiah came to be among us and one of us:

*Mystics from the Middle East saw it in the stars,  
and travelled from afar on a hunch  
and returned home with news of something truly human.*

John the Evangelist has this rather poetic way of talking about the incarnate Word of God, Jesus, the Messiah, the Word that has existed from the beginning but almost veiled from human comprehension:

*The Word was always in the world  
but the world didn't even notice him  
Though the world owed its existence to the Word  
and though the Word was present in its every breath  
the world was oblivious to him  
and went about its self-destructive business  
its power, its politics, its bloodshed  
without any reference to the Word  
to the True Human.*

Another prophetic revelation of the Messiah, surprise, surprise, is from the Qur'an, Chapter 3: 45-47 where it reads:

*"The angels said, 'O Mary!*

*Allâh gives you news of a Word from Him  
whose name will be the Messiah,  
Jesus, son of Mary,  
who will be held in honour in this world and the next...  
'He will speak to the people in his infancy  
and in his adulthood.  
He will be one of the righteous.'  
Mary said, 'My Lord, how can I have a child  
when no man has touched me?'  
The angel said, 'This is how Allâh creates what He will.  
When He has ordained something,  
He only says "Be" and it is.'" (Qur'an, Sura 3:45-47)*

The story of Jesus' conception and birth, and its link with divinity, is remarkable. For, this we know, that Jesus was conceived to a young country girl - a nobody, really, who was not yet properly married. Joseph was entirely within his rights to publicly disown her but he decided to set his privilege aside, and divorce her quietly, instead. Then an angel came to him and told him to do something extraordinary: Stay with the woman, claim her child. And that is exactly what he did. Notice how Jesus' birth is announced to the lowliest of people, the shepherds. In those days, shepherds were rough, isolated, often regarded as religiously impure, social outcasts. But to them come angels announcing strange good news. "Do not be afraid! A Saviour has been born—and all the people will celebrate!" For this saviour is the real deal: and you'll find him, not in the emperor's palace, but lying in a feeding trough.

So the shepherds go to Bethlehem, find the baby as described, and know that it's all true—and so they break out into the streets shouting and singing for joy! Because the world has been turned upside down. The Lord has lifted up the lowly – to use Mary's song, because even though Luke mentions important stately figures like Emperor Augustus and Quirinius, governor of Syria, they are not really central to the story. Their inclusion in the story doesn't mean that they played a role in accommodating this holy, lowly family so that the Messiah could be born – no, they are still the privileged ones, they are still the leaders of empire and state and they still set the agenda of how the ordinary, common people are to be treated.

The Biblical story is the one which sets a whole new agenda. For this is a story in which the centre of God's action and intention for the world is nowhere near any human ideas of rank or privilege or success. Instead, God's action is relegated to the margins, and so this story

completely undermines the values of empire, both the Roman empire and our own. This is beautifully expressed Latin American liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez when he said:

“There, on the fringe of society,” the Word became history, contingency, solidarity, and weakness.” That he pitched his tent among us suggests not only a desire for intimacy but a special affinity with the displaced and dispossessed, with migrants, refugees, deportees, detainees, “aliens” of all kinds — all men, women, and children, past, present, and future, in forced exile. (If we read the nativity narratives without the scandal of our current immigration crisis in mind we are missing something crucial about their significance).

The world has been turned upside down: God chose to be born into complications and poverty: an unwed mother; a household which could not find proper accommodation; a family being pushed around by the state; a family which was soon under threat, and which had to flee to Egypt for safety. And God did not choose to be announced to the powerful in the imperial courts, but instead to no-status social outcasts living in occupied territories. And yet the story of the birth of this child continues to be told (as prophesied by various prophets hundreds of years before), for, in this baby’s birth and in everything which followed, ordinary struggling people recognise themselves, and find hope and wholeness and healing.

For God chooses to work in obscure and humble places; God chooses to operate in occupied territories and oppressive situations; God chooses to speak through the outcast, the stranger, and those who have been shamed; God chooses to dwell in mangers and at modest tables: and it is not from the halls of power but from humble places that God’s love pours out wholeness and healing and peace erupts into life.

There, in a nutshell, is the promise of the Gospel: that God regularly shows up where we least expect God to be and always for us.

So though this world may be dark, it is not forsaken, and the headlines we read and worry about (stories of failed states, rampant corruption, unrelenting diseases and the superiority complex of nationalism) will have their day and yet they too will fade again against the backdrop of this story we’ve been telling now for over 2000 years. God loves this world! And God will not give up on it...or us. Moreover, God continues to come to love and bless this very broken world and invites us to do the same whenever we encounter brokenness or darkness.

So let's allow this story to seep into the dark areas of our lives, those places we wonder if it can possibly be true, those spaces where the world's darkness seems so much more prominent than the light. Because, let's face it – so many of us struggle to see God amid the gloomy headlines. So many more wonder where God is amid their own more private pain of fractured relationships, lost loved ones, loneliness, illness, job loss, or depression.

BUT that's what this story was made for – to shine light in dark places, to bring hope to the discouraged, insight to the lost, and the promise of peace to all who long for it. And the challenging thing is: we are instruments of that light, that hope, that encouragement and that peace.

May you all have a wonderful Christmas with family and friends!!