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Luke 2:1-20 (v 11)
Christmas Day 2021
Zion, Monarto

The Saviour, Christ, the Lord, has been born humbly for you

St Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is enjoyable just because it's about a birth. It's indeed wonderful to see **any** tiny new life with all the potential it has. But what St Luke tells us is more than enjoyable. It's a **stunning** story firstly because of who the baby is, and secondly because of the reason for his birth.

The birth itself was ordinary enough. It's about a descendant of King David by adoption, who was born in David's town. His adoptive father Joseph came to Bethlehem together with his by then, wife Mary, to register for a census. "*And it came to pass, while they were there, the time came for her to give birth*" (v 6). There was no frantic search for accommodation at the last moment. Even if the couple had arrived close to the time of Jesus' birth, there would have been relatives more than happy to take them in. Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral home. His relatives would have been most offended if he'd looked for accommodation elsewhere. But the guest room—not the inn—was full. The only other time the word that needs to be translated as 'guest room' is used, is in ch. 22(:11), in connection with the last Supper. Peter and John were to say to the master of the house, "*The Teacher says to you, Where is the **guest room**, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?*" When Jesus was about to be born, the guest room must have been occupied by other relatives. Under those circumstances, what better place to give birth than in a lower part of the house where the animals were quartered? Sometimes caves were used to shelter one's animals and according to a second-century tradition, Jesus was born in a cave [I H Marshall]. At any rate, His birth as such was ordinary, even homely. But He was no ordinary baby.

It's not only St John who tells us unmistakably that Jesus is God. Did you notice the enormity of the angel's message to the shepherds? We're told that the angel of the **Lord** appeared to the shepherds, and that "*the glory of the **Lord** shone around them*". Then the angel brought them the startling news that the Saviour, Christ, **the Lord**, had been born. He's God come to save His people. He's the Son who is equally God with the Father and the Holy Spirit. By His conception and birth, the One through whom everything was created, also became a part of His creation. He is Creator and creature in one person.

He's the **Christ**, the Anointed One, the King who was promised to King David almost a thousand years before (2 Sam 7:12-14). Later, even the place of His birth was named. Some 250 years after the time of King David, the prophet Micah (5:2) wrote about Israel's future ruler coming from Bethlehem. He said He would shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord and be great to the ends of the earth. From David, the shepherd-become-king, has come an even greater King who shepherds His people forever.

He's the King who is also **Saviour**, because He is the Lord. There's only one Saviour and that's the Lord Himself. So He says in Isaiah chs 43 and 45. In Is. 43(:11), for example, He says, "*I, I am the **LORD**, /and besides me there is **no saviour***".

In his poem entitled 'Christmas', the late poet laureate John Betjeman asks, "And is it true? And is it true, /This most tremendous tale of all, /Seen in a stained-glass window's hue, /A Baby in an ox's stall? /The Maker of the stars and sea /Becomes a Child on earth for me?" Is it true? Is it to be believed in a scientific age? The answer must be an unqualified 'yes'! Not science, but the human spirit is a stumbling block to faith. It ever wants to take the place of God.

This is what Francis Collins says as he tells his life story in his book *The Language of God*. Francis Collins was director of the US National Human Genome Research Institute. In the year 2000 the International Human Genome Project was completed. It had taken over a decade to write out the make-up of DNA in the human body. DNA is “the instructions for building a human being”, as Dr Collins puts it. The human genome comprises a text that is 3 billion letters long, written in a four-letter code. A live reading of the code, day and night, at the rate of one letter per second would take 31 years, he has written. When the work of writing out the human genome was completed, a ceremony marking the event was held at the White House. In a speech he gave, Dr Collins said, “It is humbling for me, and awe-inspiring, to realise that we have caught the glimpse of our own instruction book, previously known only to God”.

He hadn't always thought that way about God. As a young man growing up in a world full of temptations, he has written, it was convenient to ignore the need to be answerable to any higher spiritual authority. That was to change when he was 26 and in third year of medical school. While involved in the care of patients, he was profoundly affected by the faith of numerous individuals who were undergoing terrible suffering. Despite their suffering, their faith assured them of ultimate peace. This set him on the road of reassessing his own atheism. He read *Mere Christianity* by C S Lewis and found especially powerful Lewis' argument for God's existence from the moral law that's found in all people. From the high standards of this moral law, he understood that God is holy and righteous. He is not kindly or indulgent. He's the embodiment of goodness, and He hates evil. The gradual realisation that such a God might exist brought to his mind conflicting feelings: comfort at the existence of the vast mind of God, yet also dismay at the realisation of his own imperfections viewed in God's light. He began to accept the possibility of the existence of God—but not a god who set the universe in motion and then left it to itself. He rightly believes that the true God desires a relationship with human beings, His special creatures. He believes that miracles are a real possibility. He has written, “If one is willing to accept the existence of God or some supernatural force outside nature then it is not a logical problem to admit that, occasionally, a supernatural force might stage an invasion” [*The Sunday Times* 11.6.06].

The coming of Jesus was an invasion by God into our world. But what an invasion—as a baby on a manger! Anglican clergyman Austin Farrer has written quite beautifully, “Mary holds a finger out, and a divine hand closes on it. The maker of the world is born a begging child; he begs for milk, and does not know that it is milk for which he begs. We will not lift our hands to pull the love of God down to us, but he lifts up his hands to pull human compassion down upon his cradle.” Some of this is reminiscent of Martin Luther's Christmas hymn, “All praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ” [LHS 20], that sadly is rarely sung these days. Luther's hymn in a modern translation says, “He's God the Father's only Son, /yet a manger is his throne; /the everlasting source of good /is clothed in our poor flesh and blood. /Lord have mercy! /Though greater than the earth and skies, /now in Mary's lap he lies; /he who alone rules over all /has now become a child so small. /Lord have mercy!”

That brings us to consider the reason for Jesus' birth. By coming as a baby, our Lord did more than gain people's trust through His weakness. He came to totally identify with human beings so that He might **save** human beings. As the Righteous One (Is 53:11) He would take our sins on Himself and pay for them by His death on a cross. There are reminders of His death in the account of His birth. When He was born, He was wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a manger. When He died, He was wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a tomb. When Jesus was born, the angel announced to shepherds, “*unto you is born **this day** in the city of David a Saviour*”. As He was dying, the Lord said to the repentant criminal, “*Truly I say to you, **this day** [It's the same word in Greek] you will be with me in paradise*” (23:43). When Jesus was born, the heavenly army sang, “**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!**” As Jesus approached Jerusalem on the Sunday before His crucifixion, Luke says that the multitude of His disciples praised God saying, “*Blessed is the King who*

*comes in the name of the Lord! **Peace** in heaven and **glory** in the highest!" (19:38). Both Jesus' birth and His death have brought glory and peace in heaven and on earth. When Jesus was born, the angel said, "behold, I proclaim to you good news of **great joy** that will be for all the people". After Jesus rose from the dead and was carried up into heaven, the Eleven "worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with **great joy**" (24:52).*

We on our part need to repent and believe in Him who came for our sakes. The good news about the birth of the Saviour, Christ, the Lord, that was told far and wide by the shepherds became even more profound when He died and rose again for our salvation. The good news about God's gracious invasion of our world continues to go out into the world today, calling us away from sin and death to forgiveness and life and joy in Him.

The Saviour, Christ, the Lord, who was born humbly and died even more humbly, also comes to us humbly to be received in faith by us. Christmas is about more than our celebration of Jesus' birth. At its heart is not what we do, but what He does for us. He comes to us by the humble means of His word. As well, He comes under the humble means of bread and wine to give us His body and blood for our salvation. He comes to give Himself to His baptised people as the food of life. He comes to save us from our sins so that He might live in us and we in Him (Jn 17:23, 26), now on earth and forever in glory. Therefore, on this Christmas Day, like blessed Mary, let us ponder these things in our hearts and, like the shepherds, return to our homes and our work glorifying and praising God. Praise and glory indeed for the Saviour, Christ, the Lord who was born for us and for the salvation and peace He gives us!

—Pastor David Buck