

Sunday 13th December 2020
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on Luke 2:1 – 7
Theme: “Hospitality and care at the birth of Jesus”
“Love and care for one another, *and for others*”
(No. 3 of “The values of Christmas: service, hospitality)

Introduction:

I wonder, “How hospitable are you?” On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is “very hospitable”, and 0 is “lousy at hospitality”, how do you rate? I think that I’d rate myself only about a “5” or a “6”.... I don’t find it easy to be hospitable and caring to others: to invite people into our home, and even have them stay the night or longer. It’s something that God’s Spirit needs to continually guide me in and empower me in....

Yet, I know that this is what God wants us to do.... And that having people in your home over a meal *and for the night or more* is a great way in which to care for people.... Which is what God wants of us *His children* this Christmas, and right throughout the year.... This is the value of Christmas, *and of the Christian life*, that we are looking at this morning, as we continue our Christmas series of messages on “The values of Christmas”.

Our focus this morning is on hospitality and the care of one another, *and of others, including even strangers*.... And the truth of the matter is that Jesus might not have even been born, *but for the hospitality of an unknown relative of Joseph’s*. Let me explain....

Part 1: The hospitality of Joseph’s relative

Let me explain by us revisiting the situation of Mary and Joseph in the events leading up to the birth of Jesus and the events of the actual birth....

In the time before the baby Jesus was due to be born, the Emperor Augustus ordered a census to be taken of all the people in the Roman Empire. To make this census possible, people had to go to their home town, and Joseph was a descendant of David and so his home town was Bethlehem, “the city of David” (*Luke 2:1-4; cf. Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, p. 25 & “Manger and Inn”, p. 35*).

So Joseph had to go to Bethlehem shortly before Mary was due to give birth. As I said last week, Mary could have stayed in Nazareth to give birth to her child there, with the women of her own family helping with the birth. But, Luke tells us:

Joseph went to register with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child (*Luke 2:5*).

The very pregnant Mary goes with Joseph to Bethlehem. Why? Well, probably because Joseph was still concerned with how the villagers of Nazareth would treat Mary and her newly born child (*cf. most of them thought that Mary was an adulteress and that the child was illegitimate*). I suspect that as her new husband, he just didn't want to leave her and the child on their own....

In any case, Bethlehem was his home town, and there would have been plenty of places for him and his very pregnant wife to stay there among his family and relatives, and many women from his family who would be there to help with the birth (*cf. Addenda 1, H. Wendt, "Christmas, the real story", p. 22*).

Luke tells us:

And while they were there in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have her baby (*Luke 2:6*).

You know, the traditional story of Christmas has it that Mary gives birth to Jesus on the night that she arrives in Bethlehem. But that's not what Luke says! He tells us that "while they were there in Bethlehem", the time came for Mary to give birth. As Ken Bailey observes:

"We can easily assume a few weeks, perhaps even a month or more. Thus the birth took place in shelter found by Joseph in those weeks" (*"Manger", p. 34*).

Luke tells us:

She gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger... (*Luke 2:7*).

By the way, this is again pretty ordinary stuff, if you are aware of how a Middle-Eastern home was set up then, and still is in many village homes in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, even up to the middle of the twentieth century. Listen to Ken Bailey as he describes a simple village home in the Middle-East:

But simple village homes in Palestine often had but two rooms. One was exclusively for guests. That room could be attached to the end of the house or be...on the roof.... The main room was a “family room” where the entire family cooked, ate, slept, and lived. The end of the room, next to the door, was either a few feet lower than the rest of the floor, or blocked off with heavy timbers. Each night into that designated area, the family cow, donkey, and a few sheep could be driven. And every morning, those same animals were taken out and tied up in the courtyard of the house. The animal stall would then be cleaned for the day. Such simple homes can be traced from the time of David up to the middle of the twentieth century. I have seen them both in Upper Galilee and in Bethlehem (*Bailey, p. 28-29*).

And mangers, animal feeding troughs, were dug out of the lower end of the living room, so that the animals in the animal stall could eat hay from them if they were hungry in the middle of the night or whenever (*Bailey, p. 30; cf. H. Wendt’s slides: 2A, 2B*).

By the way, Luke’s final statement in his account of the birth of Jesus, “because there was no place for them in *the inn*”, even makes perfect sense, when you realise that the Greek word here, *kataluma*, which is translated in most Bibles as “the inn”, actually also means “the guest room” or “the upper room”. And this surely is the meaning that Luke wants us to understand here.... In fact, Luke uses this same Greek word later on in his Gospel to describe just this: “the upper room” that was prepared by the disciples for the Last Supper (*Luke 22:11*). *If Luke wanted to talk about an “inn”, he would have used an entirely different Greek word, the word pandocheion, as he does in the Parable of The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34).*

So Luke is telling us, *in his account of the birth of Jesus*, that Mary and Joseph stay the home of an unknown relative *and his family* in Bethlehem, that they sleep on the floor of the main room of the house *with the rest of the family because the guest room is already occupied*, that it is here that Mary’s child is born *presumably with the help of the women folk of the family*, and that they don’t need a crib because the soft bed of a manger is adjacent to where Mary and Joseph lie (*cf. Addenda 2 & Lost Sheep story entitled “Bethlehem Town”*).

As we think about the values of Christmas, *and the value of hospitality and care in particular*, the important thing for us to realise is that without the

hospitality and care by that unknown relative of Joseph and his family, baby Jesus might not have been born safely.

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus reminds us of how important it is to be hospitable and caring, *and in fact how life-changing acts of hospitality and care can be....*

Part 2: Hospitality in the New Testament

Loving care of one another *in God's family*, and hospitality, *Lit*, "love of the stranger", *Greek, philo-zenia*, are part and parcel of life for us, God's children. That's what God wants of us: to respond to His undeserved love for us with love of Him (*put hands up toward God*) and love of one another (*point to one another*), and love of anyone and everyone (*Matt. 22:34-40*).

How do we love one another, *us who are brothers and sisters in God's family*? Well, the description in Acts of what happened after Pentecost gives us more than a few pointers.

Luke tells us:

All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their home, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people (Acts 2:44-47).

Loving one another involves spending time with one another, opening our homes to one another and eating together, and sharing our material possessions with those in need....

And what does love of "anyone and everyone" involve? Well the parable of the Good Samaritan gives some pointers with regard to this....

Listen to how Jesus finishes this parable:

...But a Samaritan who was travelling that way came upon the man, and when he saw him, his heart was moved to compassion. He went over to him, poured oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them; then he put the man on his own animal and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. "Take care of him", he told the

innkeeper, “and when I come back this way, I will pay you whatever else you spend on him” (Luke 10:33-37).

Love of “anyone and everyone” involves feeling compassion for those in need, offering practical help, and providing shelter and food for them. In this parable, the Good Samaritan offers “hospitality”, that is “love towards a stranger”, to the man who had been beaten up (*cf. Matt. 25:31-46*).

Paul sums all this up in a couple of verses.

He writes in his letter to the Christians in Rome:

Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, pray at all times. Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians, and open your homes to strangers, *Lit, “practice hospitality”, love of strangers (Rom. 12:13; cf. Heb. 13:2).*

Well, I started by asking you, “How hospitable are you?” I think that our journey this morning as we’ve thought about the hospitality of that unknown relative of Joseph’s, and about hospitality and care in general, has reminded me of the importance of showing practical love to one another, and to “anyone and everyone”

Has it reminded you of that? I hope so....

Thank God for His ongoing forgiveness of me, *and you*, as we live out our life as God’s children, trusting in Jesus as our Saviour, and trying to follow in his footprints....

Can I finish by suggesting a couple of practical things that you and I can do this Christmas and in the New Year *if we are serious about loving one another and “anyone and everyone”* as God wants us to....

- * **Ask a brother or sister in God’s family around to your home for a ‘cuppa’ or a meal**

- * **Look out for fellow Christians who have nowhere to go for a meal this Christmas, and invite them to your home (*cf. my abysmal Christmas on my own in the 1970’s*)**

- * **Support the needy whom we don’t personally know with our possessions, *our finances e.g.***
 - ❖ **LCC Christmas Appeal**
 - ❖ **ALWS Gifts of Grace**
 - ❖ **Barnabas**

Conclusion:

Well, in these weeks before Christmas we've been looking at the values of Christmas, *and of the life of a follower of Jesus in general*. Today our focus has been on "hospitality and care"

Can I finish with a blessing:

"May God bless you and me as we live out life as followers of Jesus, trying to love one another, and "anyone and everyone" as God wants us to, *and knowing that when we fail, God has us in His loving, forgiving arms.*

Addenda:

1. Listen to what Ken Bailey has to say about the birth of Jesus in this book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*:

- * **Joseph was returning to the village of his origin. In the Middle East, historical memories are long, and the extending family, with its connect to its village of origin, is important. In such a world a man like Joseph could have appeared in Bethlehem, and told people, “I am Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat, the son of Levi”, and most homes in the town would be open to him.**
- * **In every culture, a woman about to give birth is given special attention. Simple rural communities the world over always assist one of their own women in childbirth, regardless of the circumstances. Are we to imagine that Bethlehem was an exception.**

Was there no sense of honor in Bethlehem? Surely the *community* would have sensed its responsibility to help Joseph find adequate shelter for Mary and provide the care she needed. To turn away a descendant of David in the “City of David” would be an unspeakable shame on the entire village.

- * ***In any case, if Joseph had failed to find shelter in Bethlehem, he would naturally have turned to Mary’s relatives Zechariah and Elizabeth, who lived nearby “in the hill country of Judea (Kenneth Bailey, p. 25-26).***

2. Harry Wendt, using Ken Bailey’s material, has this to say:

- * **Most likely they were welcomed into a home that had a guest room, but the guest room was already occupied (“there was no room in the *guest room*”).**

The host could not ask those who were already living in the guest room to leave. However, since people in that land at that time were used to living in close quarters and slept on mats on the floor, it would not have been a problem to find room for Mary and Joseph elsewhere in the house. At night, mater were rolled out for sleeping. In the morning, they were rolled up again and stored against the walls – so that sleeping space might again become living space (*H. Wendt, Christmas the Real Story, 22-23*).