

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## Christmas Broadcasts: Christmas Message (2003)

Last Christmas I remember driving past our local supermarket. Fortunately, the inside lane I was driving in was clear but the outside lane had a long queue of cars stretching for several hundred yards. The cars were waiting to get into the car park of the store. If it was so busy outside, what was it like inside?!

As I continued my journey home, I began to think about the overwhelming commercial aspects of Christmas and the frenzy of activity that overtakes us each December. But then I realised that the very first Christmas was probably just the same. On that day the whole world was moving. Of course, there were no cars but in every city, town and village people were travelling. Everyone was on journeys back to the place where their ancestors were born. They needed food and shelter. It was a good time for business - the busiest period in a long time I suspect. All the shops and hotels were doing a roaring trade.

But why were all these people travelling? If you could have asked them, they would have probably told you, "It's the Romans. They want to count how many people there are in their empire." In one sense they would have been right. The most powerful man in the world, Caesar Augustus, decided to do a census of the entire world. And in a display of extraordinary power he ordered everyone to move and the whole world moved.

It is only when you read the Bible that you discover it was not man's power at work but God's. Christmas is all about God moving. First He moves the whole world by using the power of the Roman Empire. God has a distaste of great men counting the people they rule to discover the extent of their empires or proudly viewing the great cities they have built. He punished David for counting the people of Israel. He humbled great Nebuchadnezzar, who gloried over the Babylon he had built, until he exclaimed, "I blessed the Most High and praised and honoured Him who lives forever" (Daniel 4:34). No, God was not interested in the pride of the Romans but He was interested in ensuring that His word would be fulfilled. He had promised that the Saviour of the world would be born in the little town of Bethlehem. And, to achieve this promise, He moved the whole world so that His Son would be born in that very town.

When I was young, and it thundered, my Grandmother would say God was moving the furniture. Well, God certainly moves in the world He created but often in a quiet and unseen way. Silently and powerfully His will is being fulfilled. Sometimes He uses the powers in the world. He used the Babylonians to discipline Israel but then used the Persians to invite His people back to the land to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem. He used a great fish to capture Jonah's attention and then a tiny worm to teach him about compassion.

And, so it was, on the first Christmas. God used extraordinary power to bring Joseph and Mary into Bethlehem but then brings His Son into the world in the most ordinary way. He allows Jesus to be born in a stable because there was no room in the Inn. In Christ we have both the power of an almighty God and the reality of His manhood. That night, whilst so many were returning to the warmth of homes and families, Christ was being born homeless. Homelessness was something Jesus experienced at His birth; there was no room at the inn. During His life He could say, "the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head". And, in death, He was laid in other man's tomb. God's love entered the world by enormous power but that same love is demonstrated in poverty. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."

But, at Christmas, God did not only move earth, He also moved heaven. The only witnesses to the birth of Christ, as far we know, were Mary and Joseph. They alone experienced the coming of the Son of God into the world He had made. Just like today, people carried on with their lives unaware of this one great moment of history. There was no one to herald the coming of the King of kings and Lord of lords. So God, who had the power to control Caesar's decisions to move the people of the world, now moves heaven. He was not going to allow the birth of His Son to go unnoticed. He sends angels to announce the birth of Jesus. He may have used the greatest ruler on earth to ensure that the incarnation would fulfil His ancient promises, but He does not tell princes, kings or even priests that Jesus had been born. No, He tells local shepherds, who as a result become the first worshippers of the Good Shepherd.

When I first saw the "Shepherds Fields" just outside Bethlehem, I must confess I was disappointed. They were so ordinary. I'm not sure what I expected. But ordinary is what I got. They were not much different to the stony fields

with scattered sheep I knew of on the Pennine Hills in Lancashire. Yet, to such an ordinary place the angels came. Earth may not have had the least inkling of the birth of Jesus but the angels were full of it. This is a challenge to the hearts of all Christians. In a world where Christ is still left out of Christmas, what are we doing to convey the wonder of God's love to this world through the incarnation? Like the angels, we should be full of the wonder of God's glory, love, grace and peace. How sad that an event so astonishing can be stripped of all its meaning and replaced by excess. Christmas is about the power and reality of Christ entering into a world full of need. Need which only He could, and still can, meet. Christ is still outside of the world's thinking. It is for us to relay the fact that Christ is still the answer to man's need.

It is in keeping with the character of God that He reveals Himself to those who are lowly. God's relationship with shepherds is a long one. Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David were all shepherds. These men learned the principles of caring for God's people through the loneliness and discipline of caring for flocks of simple animals. Jacob could talk about the "God who shepherded me all the days of my life". David sang, "The LORD is my shepherd". The Lord Jesus at the end of John's Gospel asks Peter to "shepherd His sheep" and as an old man Peter writes to his fellow elders, "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you" (1 Peter 5:2). It is not surprising, then, that on the night the Good Shepherd was born, God told the Bethlehem shepherds about His birth.

The message the shepherds received is an enlightening one. It was good news for all people. It was joyful news. It was about Jesus the Saviour and the Lord. God's unchanging message of salvation is centred in the person of His Son. It is about us receiving Him as our Saviour and serving Him as our Lord. Yet this Saviour is first revealed as a child born in a manger. Here we have the consistent theme of God's love. It was God coming down to where we were that we could be brought into the blessing of God. The message of so many religions is that we can in some way reach up to where God is or at least find Him in some way. The Christian message is that God comes down to where we are to meet all the need of the human condition. Jesus is born. Immanuel, "God with us". Adam entered the world not as a child but as a man. God could have sent Christ as a man into the world. But He did not. Jesus experienced birth, life and death. And more than this, He experienced the poverty of the manger, the obscurity of Nazareth, the rejection of His people and the suffering of Calvary to demonstrate the fullness of God's love.

No wonder the angels were moved to announce, "Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men". These words are the themes of Christ's life. He alone glorified God. He alone brings peace to the human heart. This message was, and still is, revealed to people with humble and simple hearts and it still is. The great and powerful of Israel doubted the birth of Christ and then moved to destroy the infant Jesus. Herod attempted to destroy the Holy Child by sending his soldiers to massacre little children. We still live in a world where inhuman acts abound. Doubt and destruction still have a place in the hearts of proud men. Attempts are still made to belittle and dishonour the person of Christ. However, the simplicity and power of the way Christ came into the world is an abiding testimony of God's love for the world. And to find Christ we need a simple faith and a lowly mind. Peter reminds us that, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). It was with such an attitude the shepherds came to the stable to see the Child and began to share the good news. There was no confusion or doubt in the hearts and minds of divinely directed visitors. On the one hand they had seen angels, on the other a tiny Child in a stable. Faith, and only faith, accepts the majesty and humility of Christ. Faith results in worship and service. This is the example the shepherds give us. They worshipped the child and spread the good news.

But God was not only moving earth and heaven on that Christmas. He was moving Himself. In Exodus 3, God spoke these wonderful words to Moses: "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land." I believe those words "I have come down" looked beyond the slavery of the children of Israel in Egypt to the moment when God's Son entered into a world where the whole of mankind needed salvation. Jesus had come down to deliver. God was no longer speaking and acting from a distance. He was now in the world He created. And with the people He loved.

Hebrews 1 explains that, in times past, God had spoken through the prophets but now He spoke by His Son. In Philippians 2 we read that Jesus, "made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men". The wonder of that first Christmas night was not that God moved earth and heaven but that He moved Himself. As I said earlier, we could not move towards Him, in terms of working out our own salvation, but in grace and love He stepped out of eternity into time to save us. That is the wonder of Christ's immaculate birth. He was born of a woman. But it was a virgin birth. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God". In an age of designer babies, cloning and talk of understanding and recreating human life, people still find it impossible to believe in the virgin birth. It seems we are capable of an arrogant faith in what we can do, but no faith in what God has done. Christ was divinely placed in Mary's womb. Jesus took human form but was divine. He was and could only be sinless. He alone could meet the righteousness of God and the need of man. These are fundamentals of the Christian faith and at Christmas we should pause and adore the God who moved towards us.

This movement of God took enormous power. We generally think of power being used to do very large things. Nanotechnology is the science and technology of building electronic circuits and devices from single atoms and molecules. It is heralded as the new and exciting breakthrough in science. On that first Christmas God was working on the smallest scale to show the largeness of His heart. He used all His power at the incarnation to become small. In 2 Kings 4, Elisha raises the son of the Shunammite woman. Starting at verse 32 we read, "When Elisha came into the house, there was the child, lying dead on his bed. He went in therefore, shut the door behind the two of them, and prayed to the LORD. And he went up and lay on the child, and put his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands; and he stretched himself out on the child, and the flesh of the child became warm. He returned and walked back and forth in the house, and again went up and stretched himself out on him; then the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes".

Elisha stretches himself to become small - the size of a child. This is what Jesus did. He used all His power to become small - the size of a baby. He did this to enter our world, identify with our need and to give new life.

God moved earth. God moved heaven. And God moved Himself. He also moved some other people - the wise men.

We can come to Christ in different ways. Some of us are led to Christ instantaneously. Just like the Shepherds we hear the good news of the Gospel for the first time and we respond immediately. This does happen, but it is very rare. I can only think of very few people I know who came to Christ in this way. For most of us coming to Christ is a journey. Sometimes it is a very long journey on which different people and different experiences are used to eventually lead us to the Saviour. The story of the wise men is such a journey. It is God who is again working behind the scenes to bring these men to Christ.

The wise men had discovered a star which eventually led them to Jerusalem. The background to this story suggests the wise men were searching for something. God always responds to those who look for Him. Think of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 or Lydia in Acts 16. These were people who were searching for God and God intervenes in their lives to present Christ to their hearts.

Whenever I think of the mysterious star seen by the wise men, I think of the work of the Spirit of God. It is His work to lead people to Christ. Jesus, speaking of the Spirit of God in John 15:26 says, "He will testify of Me." In John 16:13 He says, "He will guide you into all truth." And in verse 14, "He will glorify Me." Just as Christ glorified His Father whilst He was on earth, so the work of the Spirit is to glorify Christ in our hearts.

When the wise men arrived at Jerusalem they made no secret about why they were there. They had come to worship the new king. Honesty and openness are characteristics which also please God. This was in stark contrast to the treachery and dishonesty in the heart of Herod. He saw the arrival of the promised Christ as a threat to his kingdom. Self-interest was apparent at the birth of Christ and it was also apparent at His death when the chief priests delivered Christ to Pilate out of envy and the belief they would lose their position and status. The birth of Christ teaches us a lot about what is in our hearts as well as what is in God's heart.

Herod asked the chief Priests where Christ was to be born. The verse they refer to is Micah 5:2, "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel." It is interesting that the shepherd character of the Saviour is once more highlighted.

As a result of this scripture, the wise men take the final part of their journey to Bethlehem and rediscover the star which leads them to Jesus. The Bethlehem shepherds were ordinary working people. The wise men were sophisticated, intelligent and wealthy people. But the faith of the shepherds and of the wise men was just the same. Entering into the simple home where Mary and Joseph now lived with their young child, the wise men fall down to worship Jesus. We all come to the Saviour in the same way. Rich or poor, educated or uneducated, simple or clever, Jew or Gentile, we need the same simple faith. The Christmas story shows how God came down to us and how we must come to God.

The wise men gave gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus. I believe God directed these gifts. First they were practical gifts. Soon Mary and Joseph would have to flee from Israel to Egypt to escape the violence of Herod. How would they be supported? The wise men provided for their need. But secondly and beautifully, the gifts seem to represent the character of Christ. Gold in the Old Testament was used in the Tabernacle and Temple for the things of God. It was the most precious and valuable metal and was used to represent God Himself. It reminds us that Christ is God. The frankincense was the perfume which ascended from earth up to God and reminds us of the Christ's humanity on earth, glorifying God in heaven, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased". (Matthew 3:17) Finally, myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead - a poignant reminder of the reason Christ had entered the world to give His life a ransom for many. In these three gifts, the deity, humanity and sacrifice of Christ are represented.

As I think of the way God moved earth, heaven, shepherds, wise men and, most of all, how Jesus moved from heaven to earth, I am reminded of the last verse of the Christmas carol "*In the bleak mid-winter*".

*What can I give Him,  
Poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd,  
I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a wise man,  
I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give Him –  
Give my heart.*

This Christmas, as we busily move about, let's pause and remember the extent of the love of God towards us. Let us not forget to reflect on the journey Christ made to Bethlehem, so that He could make the journey to Calvary. And let us ask ourselves the question, "If He gave so much for me, what can I give Him?"

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