

Isaiah 9. 6. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 26 November 2008.

The set reading for this morning comes from the prophecy of Isaiah in the Old Testament – chapter 9 and verse 6 ... well-known words to many of us ... 'For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given ... and His name will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'.

How time flies. Christmas Day is now less than one month away. And, before we know it, we will be in 2009. And I want, as it were, to run the video back 200 years – to the year 1809. Not that I expect anyone here – with the possible exception of Mrs. Mullins¹ – to remember that far back.

In 1809 the international scene was turbulent to say the least. Napoleon was sweeping through Austria and blood was flowing freely. No journalist at the time ... and there *were* many daily newspapers back then² ... no journalist at the time gave any coverage to the birth of babies. And yet several births that year proved to be of tremendous significance. For example, that of William Gladstone – destined to become one of our finest statesman – and of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. It was also the year when a Doctor from Shrewsbury, Robert Darwin, named his fifth child 'Charles' – and when the cries of a newborn infant shattered the peace of a rugged log cabin in Kentucky, USA. That baby's name was Abraham Lincoln.

We can take it that the newspaper headlines of the day sounded out messages along the lines, 'The history of the world is being shaped today on an Austrian battlefield'. But, we now know that history was *actually being shaped* that year in the un-noticed cradles of England and America.

And I guess that ... if we went back – not two *hundred* years – but two *thousand* years ... and ventured into the city of Rome, we would have found that the public government announcements – for the Caesars regularly issued such³ – that these bulletins were dominated – much as were the headlines here on Monday evening⁴ – by tax issues. For the year I have in mind was the year of the universal census decreed by the then Caesar – Augustus – which census was conducted largely for taxation purposes.⁵

As it happens, we can't be *absolutely* sure which year that was – although, ironically, it was certainly *not* the year which divides our calendar eras into BC and AD. We owe *that* particular division to a sixth century monk at Rome, by name Dionysius Exiguus, who, in an attempt to calculate the dates of future Easters, tried to pin down the year of our Lord's birth. But, alas for future generations, 'Dennis the Little' – which would be the modern equivalent of the monk's name – like many young people since, *had great trouble with his dates* (!).⁶ For Herod the Great – who, according to Matthew's gospel, 'sought the Child to destroy Him'⁷ – *died* in 4 BC – in which case, our Lord was, of course, born some little time before that.

But whichever year it was, we can rest assured that everyone at the time thought that taxation was *the* big news – that nobody in Rome – from the Emperor down – had the slightest notion that Isaiah's 700-year old prophecy was then being fulfilled, and that a young Jewish girl in far-off Judea was cradling *the biggest news of all*.

As we all know, among the first to hear the news, outside the immediate family⁸, were certain shepherds keeping watch over their flock in one of the fields around the small town of Bethlehem. As I read, Isaiah had foretold that '*unto us a Child is born*'. And, in many ways, the announcement by the angel of the Lord to the shepherds echoed the prophet's words ... '*Unto you is born* this day in the city of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord'.

But we can hardly miss the obvious *difference* – that this angel could only greet the Lord's birth in the role of a *spectator* – and not that of a recipient – '*unto you is born*' were his words. It was only one of the human race – such as the prophet Isaiah – who could say, '*unto us ... is born*'. For, as one of the epistles of the New Testament says, 'He (the Lord Jesus) did not take hold of angels' ... meaning, 'it is not angels that He came to help'.⁹ Compare the English Standard Version, 'surely it is not angels that He helps', Heb. 2. 16.

No – He came to help men and women – to help men and women who had gone their own way and who had violated God's laws – to help men and women who were (in the language of scripture) 'sinners'. And that is why the angel spoke to the shepherds in terms, not of the birth of a great teacher or a good man – though our Lord was both of these – but of a 'Saviour'.

'Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given', our text reads. Just two chapters before, Isaiah had declared – in words quoted by Matthew in his gospel with reference to our Lord's birth – 'Behold, the virgin shall be with *child* ... and they shall call His name *Immanuel*', which name, Matthew added, is translated, '*God with us*'.¹⁰ For Mary's 'child' was *no ordinary child*! For the 'Child born' was, at one and the same time, the 'Son given'. And what mysteries lie here. For the 'child' of Mary was none other than the 'Son' of God ... one in nature from eternity with God the Father. And, as voiced by our reading today, *one* of the names of *the 'Child'* was to be '*the Mighty God*'.

And He – the Mighty God no less – exchanged the royal robe of heaven for swaddling clothes, and the throne of heaven for a manger – for an animals' rough feeding trough.

And *why*? Listen again to the angel's words to the shepherds, 'Unto you is born this day in the city of David a *Saviour* which is Christ the Lord'. Yes, He had come to save – to save *anyone* and *everyone* willing to put their trust entirely in Him.

Writing of the birth of Jesus, Doctor Luke tells us concerning Mary that 'the days was fulfilled for her to be delivered'.¹¹ Little did Mary know then that some 33 years later – and no more than six miles away – the 'Child' *which she delivered* – the 'Son' which God gave – would die *to deliver her* ... that He would then bear in His body – the body she now so gently laid in the manger – that He would bear in His body her sins on the cross. And not hers only!

I leave the last words to the Reverend Phillips Brooks – a 'big' nineteenth century clergyman from America. I say 'big' because the Reverend Brooks stood six feet six inches tall, with a weight to match. According to one biographer, 'he sang 200 hymns from memory and blasted out sermons at a rate of 250 words a minute'.

But Phillips Brooks is probably *best* known for a Christmas carol he wrote. Just a few days before the Christmas of 1868, he paced his study, working on a sermon appropriate for the season. Out in the church the organist and Sunday School superintendent was practising carols for the coming Christmas services.

As the preacher walked up and down, his thoughts went to Bethlehem – where he had spent his Christmas three years before. He laid aside his sermon preparation ... and the words of 'O little town of Bethlehem' just seemed to flow from his pen. In a short time he had completed all four verses, which were sung that Christmas by the children of his Sunday School.¹²

We have thought this morning not only of 'a child born', but of 'a *Son* (God's Son) *given*'. And in the third verse of his carol Phillips Brooks captures this – and what I have tried to say this morning – most beautifully :

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

Footnotes

¹ Mrs. Mullins is an elderly lady from the church; she is 92 years old, with a great sense of humour.

² The first successful English daily, *The Daily Courant*, was published from 1702–1735. By the early 19th century, many cities in Europe, as well as North and South America, published newspaper-type publications. The first newspaper in France was published in 1631. In the USA, the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* became the first American daily in 1783. In 1751, John Bushell published the *Halifax Gazette*, the first Canadian newspaper. [Source : <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newspaper>]

³ In Ancient Rome, *Acta Diurna*, or government announcement bulletins, were made public by Julius Caesar and later Caesars. They were carved on stone or metal and posted in public places. [Source : <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newspaper>]

⁴ Following the Chancellor's 'Pre-Budget Report' in the afternoon of 24 November 2008.

⁵ See, for example, 'The Gospel of Luke', I. Howard Marshall, page 98.

⁶ A humorous aside based on Ray Stedman's comment on Daniel 9. 25 : ' ... they are following Bishop Ussher, the seventeenth-century Irish bishop who took it upon himself to insert dates into our Bible. But, like a young teenager, he had a great deal of trouble with his dates. It was he who dated creation at 4004 B.C.'. [<http://www.raystedman.org/daniel/0366.html>]

⁷ Matt. 2. 13.

⁸ Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth and Zachariah.

⁹ Compare the English Standard Version, 'surely it is not angels that He helps', Heb. 2. 16.

¹⁰ Matt. 1. 23.

¹¹ Luke 2. 6.

¹² http://www.sermonaudio.com/hymn_details.asp?PID=olittletownofbethlehem#history.