

Sermon: You are God's perfect choice
Luke 2:1-20
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Christmas is the feast of God the Father, who fulfils his plans with this world.
and it is the feast of Jesus Christ, the best gift imaginable - He is God with us.
and it is the feast of the Holy Spirit, who draws us up in worship to God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

1 God fulfils his plans; he rules the world.

Who rules this world? The kings and presidents and caesars of this world think they are in charge. They take their decisions, and the armies march; they take their decisions, and the journalists report about it. The historians fill their books with stories of the mighty men of this world.

Luke, the writer of the Gospel we read from today, was such a historian; carefully he described the Christmas story.

The Roman Emperor took his powerful decision; Caesar August ruled for more than 40 years, and he ruled with an iron fist. His regime was strong and if you obeyed his rule you would experience peace. If you submitted to his state religion, that said that Caesar August was Lord and Saviour, then your life was not bad. Follow the religion of the state, and you are fine... Worship the ruler, and you are okay.

Caesar August decided he wanted to hold a census - to count the people. Always good to know how many people you have, so that you can calculate how much tax to take from your humble servants.

The census was also held in Palestine, where Herod was the dictator on behalf of the Emperor. So the people were obliged to obey and register.

By being very precise about when and where Joseph and Mary and Jesus went to Bethlehem for registration, Luke makes clear that his Gospel is not a myth, but part of real history. There was a specific time when Joseph and Mary went to a specific place.

Luke also showed in this way, that not the mighty men of this world, not the kings and presidents rule, but God.

The Saviour of the World had to be born in Bethlehem, all people in Israel knew this; the prophets of Israel had predicted this. So how would God ensure that this pregnant girl Mary and her fiancée Joseph from Nazareth would go to Bethlehem, on the other side of the country?

God could have sent an angel to Joseph, as he had done in the past; he could have spoken to Mary, the Mother of God. Instead, God decided to show how he rules this universe; who is truly Lord and King.

Caesar August had woken up one day, and Caesar felt he needed some more rules, some more money, and another census. God did this, so that Mary arrived in Bethlehem, just in time for giving birth to the Lord.

Worry not too much about the rulers of our lands; whether they are people like Morsi or people like Sisi, whether they are Omar al-Bashir or Obama, they can do good things and awful things - but in any case, they are not autonomous. God himself is in charge of our world.

Fear not, God the Father holds the universe and your life in his hands. He knows the circumstances you are in, and He will not let you fall out of his caring arms.

Even when things are dark and grim - do not forget that God rules the world and He will make sure that all things will be well for you, be it in this life - or hereafter. Our lives are secure in his loving arms.

2. God gift for us; He is with you

If you do not think God can be with you - look at the first Christmas Eve. God in his love sent his angels to announce the good news of the birth of the Saviour ... to whom? Not to the political leaders. Not to the religious leaders. Not to sweet prayerful boys and girls.

God sends his angels to the shepherds in the field. The first people to hear the gospel were dirty, rough, non-religious shepherds. They worked in an environment of dirt, with sheep. That made them unclean and very disrespected by the people.

In Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Dr. Joachim Jeremias gives good information about how shepherds in those days were seen. They were seen as incompetent, despised, second class, untrustworthy, sinners. "To buy wool, milk or an animal from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property," Jeremias writes.

One Jewish tradition from those days says that no one should ever feel obliged to rescue a shepherd who has fallen into a pit. Shepherds had no civil rights; they were second class citizens. They could not fulfil legal jobs or be admitted in court as witnesses.

Into this social context of religious snobbery and class prejudice, God's Son stepped forth. And God, our Father, hand-picked lowly, unpretentious shepherds to first hear the joyous news: "It's a boy, and He's Messiah!"

God mocked the religious leaders who were clearly absent from the divine mailing list. Even from birth, Christ moved among the lowly. He came to save sinners, not the self-righteous.

God loves all people, and in order for you, tonight, to know that you are welcome in his caring arms, God stretched out those loving arms to the shepherds first. They have the honour to be the first to come to Jesus. If they could come to Jesus, you can come to Jesus tonight.

Let me give you another insight into these shepherds. The Anglican theologian Alfred Ederheim, a believer with a Jewish background, wrote over a century ago a monumental work called "The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah."

He shows from the Jewish Mishna (Shekelim 7:4) how in the times of Jesus, the herds in the area of Bethlehem were not normal sheep. They were meant to be used for the sacrifices in the Temple.

Jewish law forbade the keeping of herds of sheep and goats in Israel; they could only be kept in the wilderness, in the very barren deserts outside the green land. The only herds that could be kept in the green fields, were those for the temple service. (Mishna, Baba K. 80 a).

The sacrifices for the temple had to be perfect; that is why the Temple itself owned herds, that were kept in the area of Bethlehem, very close to Jerusalem. So that when walking to the Temple, these sheep had the least chance to get wounded, as only perfect sheep could be used.

The fact that these shepherds were the first to hear the Gospel from God himself, is significant. Not only because God stretches out his hands to lowly people - so that you and I can be assured of his love for us.

But also because these despised shepherds who cared for the sacrifices of the Temple, were the first to see the Lamb of God, who would forever take away the sins of the world.

We are on the edge here of the Old Covenant of God with Israel, that included daily animal sacrifices that could never take sins away, and the New Covenant of God - the covenant in the body and blood of His Son - that washes us clean forever. This is how God stretches out his arms to you today. You are invited to come to Him, He waits for you, to receive his love and forgiveness, at the time of Holy Communion.

3 Angels

How do we come to Jesus Christ? In worship of course.

Usually when a boy was born in a Jewish family, local musicians who come into the house to make some simple music to welcome the child. When our Lord was born in a strange place far away from friends and family, God himself send his musicians. He send the angels.

Egypt is densely populated with over 85 million people now - but our whole universe is much more densely populated. We may not see much of this, but the invisible world, heaven, is packed. Not only is God at its heart, Father Son and Holy Spirit. But God is also surrounded by countless beings like all believers who passed away in the passed, and by his servants, the angels.

The angels eternally praise God on his throne in his heavenly temple. And when the Son of God was born into our world, the angels praised God also on his throne in the manger in Bethlehem.

When the shepherds heard the Gospel from the angels, and when they saw Jesus Christ himself in the manger, they worshipped. They worshiped and they went into the world to tell all people of the amazing salvation of God that had been given to humankind.

Conclusion

God the Father arranged all things - even the most mighty politicians were used as instruments of God's plans; so let us never live in fear. God is in charge.

And God's rule is good for us. God the Son was born into our world, for saving us, for leading us back into life with God; he waits with open arms for all people. If even the despised shepherds were welcome, you can be sure that God also welcomes you with open arms.

God the Holy Spirit worked in the hearts of the shepherds so that they believed, and worshipped. This is what we also do at Holy Communion. We praise God, together with all the angels and with the shepherds. We kneel to worship Jesus Christ.

Amen