



BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 62:11-12; Psalm 97 (96); Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20

Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place

Luke 2:15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This reading is simply the continuation of the reading for Midnight Mass. Some of the information given there applies here too, of course. It illustrates a response to the events of salvation and already some are worshipping the baby.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. (Gen 25:24)

I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths. (Wis 7:4)

The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. (Is 1:3)

(i) David as shepherd: When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said,

"Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah. (1 Sam 16:6-13)

(ii) Davidic shepherd to come: I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. (Ezek 34:23) My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. (Ezek 37:24)

(iii) Bethlehem: Often mentioned in connection with David (1 Sam 17:12, 15; 20:6, 28; 2 Sam 23:14-16; 1 Chr 11:16-18; Luke 2:4; John 7:42). A significant echo can also be found in the book of Ruth (Ruth 1:1-2, 19, 22; 2:4; 4:11). The key text, however, is the one cited by Luke:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. (Mic 5:2)

KIND OF WRITING

(i) History: In the context of the culture,

Thought for the day

The birth of any child is always a source of wonder, when we feel nearer the mystery of life and closer to God. In the birth of Jesus, we see our God made visible and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see. The thrilling reality of the Word made flesh is both gift and call. In the words of the first letter of John, Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:11). We are challenged to love the God we cannot see in the neighbour we can see. There can be no separation of these two realities: to love God is to love your neighbour and to love your neighbour is to love God.

Prayer

Today love itself became flesh like one of us, so that you, O God, might see and love in us what you see and love in him. May we might see you and love you in our brothers and sisters.

this is "historical" writing, mirroring the conventions and practices of the time. In such cases, the writers use standard topoi, to express the significance of the person being written about. As can be seen in the notes, the history is a bit dodgy and the place given to the miraculous would not count as history today.

(ii) Midrash: Neither Mt 1-2 nor Lk 1-2 are strictly midrash, a type of rewriting and filling out of biblical narratives found at the time. However, the strong links to biblical models and motifs lend a kind of midrashic air to the writing.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

The Davidic origin of Jesus is important in the New Testament and present in the earliest texts, such as Romans 1:1-7. In the Gospels, it is important and present even in John's Gospel. David is a consistent subject of reflection also in Luke's second volume. For example:

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that

God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago. (Acts 15:12–19)

“And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets. (Acts 3:17–21).

ST PAUL

Apart from Roman 1:1-7, Paul refers to David as the author of the Psalms.

So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.” (Rom 4:6–8)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 15 Shepherds as such don’t really recur in the Gospel. But there is of course the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:3-7.

Verse 16 Mary and Joseph were previously mentioned in Lk 1:27. The word for what had been told them (*rhēma*) is a feature of Luke-Acts (5-2-19-12+14). The range is from “what was said” to “an event that can be spoken about”.

Verse 17 That is, they bear witness, confirming their experience. Cf. Luke 24:35.

Verse 18 The “all” is very important for Matthew and for Luke and on this day means that salvation is offered to all without discrimination. Here are the occurrences: 129-68-158-65+171. Cf. ‘In the last days it will be, God declares,

that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. (Acts 2:17) Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all (Acts 10:34–37). Amazement as a reaction is also a feature of Luke-Acts (7-4-13-6+5).

Verse 19 The only two other occurrences of the word “treasured” illustrate the range of meaning rather well: (i) Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are *preserved*.” (Matt 9:17) (ii) for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he *protected* him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. (Mark 6:20)

In the New Testament, the other word—“pondered”—is limited to Luke-Acts (Luke 2:19; 14:31; Acts 4:15; 17:18; 18:27; 20:14). The meaning ranges from the literal (to take with) to the metaphorical (to consider, to discuss). Heart also has a certain prominence in Luke-Acts (16-11-22-7+20).

Verse 20 To glorify has a limited frequency in Luke-Acts, but of course it is extensively used in John’s Gospel (4-1-9-23+5). The Gospel ends with something very like this: and they were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 24:53). Praising is special to Luke-Acts (0-0-3-0+3), even if not that common. “Seen and heard” make an interesting combination. Cf. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. (Luke 7:22) Then he said, “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptised, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.” (Acts 22:14–16)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. This was no ordinary child. It is the birth of the Son of God. In order to

take in the implications of that we can do well to recall Meister Eckhart’s reflection and ask ourselves how the birth of Jesus takes place in us:

What good is it to me if the eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and if I am not also full of grace?

2. The shepherds were both frightened and thrilled. Good news can sometimes be terrifying. Pregnancy and the birth of a child can give rise to both feelings. Hopefully the joy and wonder at new life outweigh the fear and apprehension. What has been your experience?

PRAYER

Today, O God of light, your loving kindness dawns, your tender compassion shines upon us, for in our Saviour, born of human flesh, you reveal your gracious gift of our birth to life eternal. Fill us with the wonder of this holy day: let us treasure in our hearts what we have been told, that our lives may proclaim your great and gentle mercy.

We make our prayer through Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, for ever and ever. Amen.

FIRST READING

Isaiah 62:11-12

The reading proclaims salvation, as befits the day. But we are also in the reading, as the people saved, and wonderful things are said of us: The Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord, the Sought-after, a City-not-Forsaken.

SECOND READING

Titus 3:4-7

Of course we love to understand things and it is right that we should bring reason and faith together. Let’s not forget however, the real motive for God’s offer of salvation: it was for no reason, except his compassion.

GOSPEL

Luke 2:15-20

How do we make our own this great day? The portrait of Mary in this short passage may help us to treasure what we hear and to ponder it in our hearts.