

# Christmas Eve Yc 24

Well, there it is, Luke's account.

And he's got a way of being a sort of historian, trying to fit things in to the pattern of world history. There it is, a decree from Caesar Augustus. The world should be registered.

It's a bit like having to enroll to vote in Australia, isn't it? But we don't have to go to one place. We can do it anywhere, such as the miracle of mass communication. But it was important that people go back to where they came from and from whence came their ancestry.

And so Joseph took his family and went to Bethlehem, the city of David, because he was of noble birth. And, of course, there's a subtext in the idea of the evangelist, the writer of the Gospel, that it should be the city of David and that the one who was to be born was of the lineage of David, as was foretold in the writings of the prophets and in the expectations of the people. So there we have it, a newly engaged, or fairly newly engaged lady, with her pregnant by her husband, about to be husband.

And, of course, there was no problem with that in those days because that was what happened. And formal marriage never took place, usually, until the wife-to-be had brought her firstborn. So she went to be registered, Joseph went to be registered, and Mary went with him, and while there they had their first child.

Then suddenly, bang, the whole picture moves. The first child comes out, there he is, wrapped up in the typical way that they did in those parts of the world. But then we immediately go out to the shepherds.

Shepherds, it's like a movie, isn't it? You move from one scene to another. And here are the shepherds coming to look at this child who were more or less ordered to do so by the angel of the Lord. They were terrified.

And why should they be? You don't often have angels appearing before you and telling you to go and look at babies. But here it is, the good news, the evangelist, the gospel, the good news, do not be afraid. Good news, a great joy for all. To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Messiah, the Lord.

And that was partly what the Jewish people were looking for, somebody who would save them, that they thought saved them from the Roman yoke, but also save them from any oppression that was grinding them into the ground. But the angel gives promise of something better to come.

You're going to see, you're going to have a Saviour born for you, a Messiah, the Lord. Now there were lots of expectations around the land of Palestine at that stage. They wanted to be delivered from the Roman yoke.

They also wanted a new leader, one who was perhaps a hero of a kind, not a hero necessarily in war, but a hero who would unite them, who would give them hope that they would be free of the oppression which was visited upon them by these foreigners, but also a

man who would unite them as a people. But here they go, and they find a baby. They find a baby wrapped in bands of cloth, and suddenly there's this spontaneous outburst of rejoicing, and there is an almost heavenly vision.

Angels praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours. And then the angels go, and the shepherds come on the scene. Now why should shepherds come on the scene? Why should shepherds come on the scene? What were shepherds? They were pretty low in the pecking order.

They were down, right at the bottom of the social rung. They were usually people who were itinerants and took a job wherever they could find one, although they were possibly well experienced in the care of sheep. But this is what happened.

These people at the bottom of the pecking order were amongst the first to have the good news, the good news that here was something special that had happened, that God had indeed favoured the people of Israel. God had indeed brought forth someone who was the repository of hope and who was a signpost to the future. The priest-poet George Herbert, a noted and famous Anglican priest-poet of the 17th century, wrote in his poem Christmas

The shepherds sing, and shall I silent be?  
My God, no hymn for thee?  
My soul's shepherd too,  
A flock it feeds of thought and words and deeds.

The pasture is thy work,  
The stream is thy grace enriching all the place.  
Shepherd and flock shall sing in all my powers,  
Outsinging the daylight hours,  
Then will we chide the sun  
For letting night take up his place and right.  
We sing one common Lord,  
Wherefore he shut himself the candle-hole.

I will go searching till I find a sun,  
Shall say, till we have done.  
Then will we sing and shine all our own day,  
One another pay, his beams shall cheer my breast,  
And both to twine,  
Till even his beams sing and my music shine.

Well, there is a very picturesque way of putting it, but it's the truth.

It's the truth that we have much to rejoice about. We live in a world in which perhaps hope is sometimes daily extinguished in certain parts of the world. There's sometimes the hope of freedom when an oppressor's yoke is thrown off.

We wait eagerly to see what's going to happen in Syria. We think of other parts of the world, especially near those lands of our Saviour's birth. And we hope for a new order to arise.

Often our hopes are dashed in the hopes of the people there who have earnestly longed for and worked for a new order, a new political and social order where they'll be free of oppression, where they'll be no longer ground down, where they'll no longer be suspected, no longer have people inform on them, forbidding surreptitiously to talk about the idea of freedom in their home country. But in the heart of human beings, there is a longing for peace. There is a longing for love.

There is a longing for joy. And all these things are promised by the Saviour Lord, Jesus Emmanuel, God with us.

We live in a world that does not easily understand the ways of God. We're more concerned with our own short-term goals or at least evading the possibility of being oppressed. God calls us to have hope. Christ is our hope bearer.

Christ is the light of the world, and the light, by being light, shows that darkness is indeed dark. So there is darkness, but there is light, and it is the light which is the hope. Jesus was the hope of the world.

Jesus is the hope of the world. And it's up to us who follow him, to revere him as the way, the truth, and the life. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself is the way it's best expressed for me anyway.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. And, of course, between the birth and the final part of the life of God with us, Emmanuel, Jesus, there are many years. Many years, but yet short years.

And we're not far from Easter, Christmas, Easter, all of those events in the life of our Lord. They're all about hope. They're all about finding a new way of looking at the world.

That a world that sometimes seems tired, a world that sometimes seems filled with betrayal can be refreshed, refreshed by the love of God. And that is what Jesus came to show us. In that tiny child, that babe of Bethlehem, there indeed was hope.

There indeed is hope. And we are called to follow the one who is the hope of the world, the one who is the light of the world. So, at this Christmas, let us pray for all those who long for freedom, who long for light, who long for love, who long for justice.

That is what we long for, all of us, whether we're in a rich, well-off country like Australia, or whether we're in the back streets of some, unfortunately, dictatorial system. Nonetheless, the hope is there for love, joy and peace.

We've journeyed through Advent, we've come to Christmas, and then we follow Jesus through the other parts of his life as we trample the highways and byways of humanity.

God gives us hope. God is our hope. Jesus is our guide.

So may the spirit of Christ be with you all at this Christmas time. May the spirit of Christ enliven our land. May the spirit of Christ conquer the darkness that is so often in the heart of human beings.

May the light of Christ illuminate the hope that really and truly gives life to all of us.

So, indeed, glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, and goodwill to all.

May Jesus, who is the hope of the world, who is the light of the world, may he light your life in the days ahead, and may we ever give thanks to our loving God, who created us and more wonderfully came amongst us in the person of Jesus, our Lord, our Saviour, our way.

Amen.

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