

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 183

The Birth of the Saviour

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 19th December, 1999**

Text: *“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2. 10, 11).*

This wonderful fact of the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! You know, there are some people who say we should not celebrate the birth of Christ: we should only celebrate His death, His resurrection; that sinners are not saved by His birth: they are saved by His death and by His resurrection. We all fully realise that our only hope of heaven is based on what the Lord and Saviour accomplished at Calvary in shedding His precious blood and then ascending to heaven a living Saviour, able to save unto the uttermost. But I always feel it is very foolish talk to say we should not celebrate the Saviour's birth, because if He had never been born, He would never have died, He would never have risen again.

Beloved friends, the great point to you and me as sinners concerning the birth of Christ is His coming, the coming of the Son of God into this world, the reason for His coming, the purpose of His coming. That is the wonder of it. It is not just His actual birth; it is why He was born. It is not just His coming; it is why He came. To put it very simply like this. There is a child at home lying so ill and the doctor is sent for but he has not come and he is awaited. Now how expectantly those anxious parents long for his coming, look for his coming. And then at last they see him coming and with what delight they open the door. It is not his arriving, his coming, that makes the little child better. It is what he does, how he acts, the medicine he prescribes. It is that which heals the little child. But don't those anxious parents rejoice when they see him arrive, see him come, because they know why he has come! The ancient church longed for His coming. “Oh that Thou wouldest rend the heavens, that Thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at Thy presence!” It was not the actual birth, the actual coming of the Lord Jesus. It was what He accomplished when He came. “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.”

So in our congregation we do not make any apology at all for celebrating with sacred joy and adoration the birth of the Lord Jesus. He was born that He might die. He came to Bethlehem that He might go to Calvary. He came that He might be a Saviour. He came bringing salvation. “Behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him.” O to see the incarnate Son of God, to look on that dear Babe of Bethlehem and behold His work is before Him – the work of redemption, the work of saving sinners with an everlasting salvation. Then, “His reward is with Him” to all eternity as “He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied.”

Very, very beautifully is the sacred birth of the Lord Jesus here recorded. Let us be very, very clear what took place. In order that sinners might be saved, it was necessary that the second Person in the Godhead, the eternal Son of God, should leave heaven for earth. It was necessary because of our dreadful, lost, ruined condition as sinners in the sight of a holy God, deserving eternal wrath, that the One who should come as the Saviour should be none less than true Almighty God, so great was our need. But it was also necessary that He should be a real Man in order to take our place and to do for us all that we could not do for ourselves. But a third thing was also vital: not only that He should be true Almighty God, not only that He should be a real Man, but also that He should be completely free from any taint of sin, either original or actual. Now how was this possible? How was it possible that a person could be born of a woman, a sinful woman, and yet be completely free from original sin? And divine, eternal Wisdom formed a plan: that He should be born of a virgin. He should have no earthly father. He should be conceived by the Holy Ghost, and that pure, holy, spotless humanity completely kept free from any taint of sin, so that He was “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.” So said the angel, “That holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.” At first we shrink from that expression, “that holy Thing.” It hardly seems reverent. But the truth of the Saviour’s sacred humanity is so carefully safeguarded in Scripture. It was not a person; the personality lies in the Godhead. There were never two distinct persons. This divine Person took our nature without sin – that was the holy Thing – into union with His divine Person. He must be Man that He might suffer; He must be God that He might save. It is important we realise what this point is. That dear, holy Babe lying in a manger: do you believe it, true Almighty God?

“As much almighty at His birth,
As on His throne supreme;
His shoulders held up heaven and earth,
When Mary held up Him.”

O that we might be favoured like the shepherds today to “go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.” Like the shepherds, “To worship an incarnate God, and know He saved us by His blood.”

“Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh.” The Bible says it is without controversy, yet there has never been a point about which there has been more controversy. “Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness.” Without controversy in God’s holy, sacred Word; without controversy in the heart of every sinner saved by grace.

The birth of Jesus, the coming of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, is all bound up with our lost, ruined condition as sinners through the Fall and by actual sin, liable to divine, eternal wrath. If Christ had not come, we should all have perished in our sin to all eternity. That little word (and it is an awful little word) that the Lord Jesus once spoke: “If I had not come.” You just consider the implications of that. “If I had not come.” As sinners we deserved eternal punishment, the wrath of God. But in the everlasting covenant, God in love and mercy ordained that He would accept a substitute in the place of His people, who should obey His holy law for them and who should bear all the punishment of their sins. So that is why He must be born. That is why He must become a real Man. It was so clear in the Old Testament: without the shedding of blood there could be no remission of sins. Now God could not bleed, so what did the second Person in the Trinity do? He became a real Man in order that He might shed that precious blood. It was as a Man that He bled but it was because of who He is, true Almighty God, there was the value, the virtue in that blood. God cannot die, but this glorious Person who came, a real Man who did die, is true Almighty God. May you be led into the deep, solemn, sacred mysteries of it. In our early days spiritually with holy delight we used to sing,

“Till God in human flesh I see,
My thoughts no comfort find;

The holy, just, and sacred Three,
Are terrors to my mind.”

And then,

“I love the Incarnate Mystery,
And there I fix my trust.”

One thing you notice. Well, to put it in the words of the well-known hymn,

“How silently, how silently,
The wondrous Gift is given!”

That is the way God works. The Lord Jesus did not come into this world with great pomp and ceremony and glory. He came into this world so silently, unobtrusively, and the world just went on as it had always gone on, and as far as we can tell according to Scripture, the only people who knew this amazing event had taken place were a few poor shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem. I think you will find in real religion even today there is not a lot of pomp and show and bustle and circumstance and noise. When the new birth takes place, how silently the Lord works in that sinner’s heart. When He comes and reveals Himself, how silently.

“How silently, how silently,
The wondrous Gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.”

O how quietly, how silently this amazing, this wonderful event took place!

And there is this amazing thing, that it was at Bethlehem. Hundreds of years before, the prophet had declared that when Messiah, the Son of God, the Christ, should come, it would be at Bethlehem. First of all it was revealed, the seed of Abraham, and then descended from Jacob, and then from Judah, and then from David. And then the very place pointed out. It was going to be Bethlehem. “But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be Ruler in Israel.” “And this Man shall be the peace.” The angel brought tidings to a virgin named Mary who did not live in Bethlehem. She lived many miles away in Nazareth in Galilee. Well the ancient promise, the ancient prophecy, was Bethlehem, and here is Mary expecting the birth of the Saviour in Nazareth. And just at the

time when the holy Child should be born there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus. He is one of the great names of history. If you read your history books, you will read about this great man, Caesar Augustus. He did not know anything about God. He did not know anything about grace. He did not know anything about Scripture. But the hearts of all men are in God's hands. Augustus sends out a decree that every man shall go to his native city, where his family had its origins. So to their great sorrow, Joseph and Mary had to make this long, arduous journey at this difficult time, and it was not until they reached Bethlehem that the Child was born.

You say, "What does that matter to you and me?" Not one of God's purposes shall fall to the ground. Not one of His providences can ever fail. Not one of His promises shall ever be in vain. You can rest upon the Word of God. You know it will stand. It seemed impossible that this promise could be fulfilled. It seemed certain that the Infant Jesus would be born in Nazareth. But Bethlehem. God's Word shall stand. And sometimes the Lord will give you a promise and perhaps you carry it locked up in your heart for many years and everything seems to go against it, everything, but the time will come when all these providences that seem against it will all turn round and all work together and you shall see that God's Word, God's promise shall stand. But sometimes it seems impossible. "Bethlehem Ephratah ... out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be Ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

I want to talk to you about these shepherds. I wonder if there are any of you this morning and you feel a love to these shepherds. We do not know their names. We do not know how many there were. We do not know whether they were old or young. But we do know that these out of the whole wide world, these few, poor shepherds on the plain of Bethlehem were the ones who were favoured with this divine revelation. The psalmist once said, "I am a companion of all them that fear Thee." I hope that this morning we shall find that we are companions with the shepherds. "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." You will not find it easy to get to Bethlehem this week. You will have so many things happening, you will find it hard to get to Bethlehem. Only one thing will get you there – if the love of Christ pulls you right through the crowd and draws you there. David said, "Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem!" But Bethlehem was in the hands of the enemy, of the

Philistines, and this sacred season we can see is in the hands of the enemy for the most part. But David had these three mighty men and they had to fight their way right through those Philistines. But they did reach the well of Bethlehem and they did draw water from the well of Bethlehem. You will have to fight your way through Philistines and devils to get to Bethlehem, but may you be favoured with joy to draw water from the well of Bethlehem. “O Christ, He is the Fountain, the deep, sweet Well of love.”

These few, poor, humble shepherds, and this morning they are singing the praises of the exalted Redeemer for ever and ever. A wonderful mercy if one day you and I join them. I feel this constantly: we are not there yet; we have not reached heaven yet. It will be a wonderful mercy if we ever do. Millions have seemed to start off well and have never reached heaven, so they have proved the Lord never began a good work in their heart and they were never possessors of grace. O how many have appeared to begin well and then they have turned and gone back into the world and made shipwreck. You and I are still in the body, still in the flesh. It will be a wonderful mercy if we are brought through at last and safely landed to join these poor shepherds, these rich shepherds, to sing to all eternity the praises of redeeming love and blood.

It was a divine revelation. People say we are narrow. Well, there was the most glorious event the world had ever seen and it was revealed to just a few people. How many, we do not know, but it was revealed to just a few. That is the mystery of divine sovereignty. Well might Judas (not Iscariot) ask that question, “Lord, how is it that Thou wilt manifest Thyself unto us, and not unto the world?” But it is going to be like it this week. There will be the world going on as it has always gone on. But there will be one here, and one there, and the Lord Jesus will gloriously reveal Himself to that one. Do I hear anyone say, “Lord, in love and mercy let that one be me”?

I think this is one of the most beautiful, sublime accounts in all Scripture. “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.” And well they might be, to have a messenger from heaven and to have a glimpse of the glory of God. When the glory of God appears, it will make sinners tremble. In days of spiritual revival,

people under a sense of the glory of God have been almost helpless, prostrate.

“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” And the emphasis: “*Unto you.*” Sinners are favoured above angels. These angels did not say, “Unto us is born a Saviour.” They said, “Unto you.” These poor shepherds were more favoured than these glorious angels. Those of you who know and love the Saviour are exalted far above angels. When Isaiah wrote, he did not say, “Unto you.” He said, “*Unto us.*” “*Unto us* a Child is born, *unto us* a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” Unto us. Unto you. “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” Now it is unto you. We need the Holy Spirit to bring salvation where we are. We need the Holy Spirit to bring salvation right into our hearts. We need the Lord in love and mercy to come right where we are. There was reality here. “Unto you.” Poor, unworthy, lost, ruined sinners. “Unto *you* is born this day in the city of David.” It would be a wonderful thing if someone here this morning, if one person heard a voice from heaven saying, “Unto *you* is born this day ... a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”

Beloved friends, it is to have a personal interest in it. The world went on. Jerusalem was supposed to be the most holy city in the world. It was the most religious city in the world, but it was not revealed to one single person in Jerusalem. These few shepherds, I believe they were amongst those who were looking for redemption in Israel, those in whose hearts the Lord had put His holy fear, and those who were waiting for the Messiah’s coming. But He came very suddenly, very unexpectedly, and He still does. How many a poor, longing soul has found how suddenly the Lord has come and turned again his captivity and sent him on his way rejoicing! “The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.” That is a sweet, sacred promise to all those of you who seek for Christ, who long for His appearing. He “shall suddenly come” – as if Satan would say, “Perhaps He will not.” “He shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.”

We have to pause here because so often the Word of God joins together the two comings of the Lord Jesus: first, His coming to Bethlehem; and His second coming at the end of time. But what a difference, what a contrast! The first time He came silently, secretly, in poverty, unknown. But when the Lord Jesus comes the second time it will be in great power and glory, King of kings and Lord of lords, with all His holy angels with Him. “Who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth?” Everyone is talking about the year 2000. How long this world will go on, no-one knows. The one thing we do know is that it will not go on for ever, that one day the Lord Jesus, just as surely as He came to Bethlehem (they had waited long, but just as surely as He came to Bethlehem), He will come again in great power and glory, not secretly. “Every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him.” A wonderful thing if anyone here this morning can say, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus.” Come quickly. It will be a solemn day when the Lord descends from heaven with a shout, when He comes in great glory and all the dead shall be raised and that great judgment seat, that great white throne shall be set up and everyone judged according to the deeds done in the body. And you here will be more accountable than most people because you will also be judged on how you have heard the gospel preached, whether you have accepted it or rejected it.

“Who may abide the day of His coming?” – His second coming – “and who shall stand when He appeareth?” If you have an interest in His first coming, as He came to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, as He came to die at Calvary for sinners, if you have an interest in His first coming, then you will stand in that great day when He comes again “the second time without sin unto salvation.” Do not misunderstand that. It is a rather puzzling Scripture, that when the Lord comes a second time He will come “*without sin* unto salvation.” Well you say, the first time He came it was without sin, wasn’t it? Well, of course it was. The meaning is, when He comes the second time *without sin*, He will not come to deal with sin, to suffer for sin, to put away sin. He will not come as the sin-bearer. He will not come as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world.

O but these poor, humble shepherds! The world went on. Jerusalem was asleep. Bethlehem was asleep. But these hosts of angels bright and glorious came down from heaven to sing the praises of their eternal King. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” “A multitude of the heavenly host praising God.” For the

most part, God has been pleased to reveal Himself to the poor and the humble of this world. It is not many wise, not many mighty, and not many rich who are called. The Lord “calls the fool and makes him know the mysteries of His grace.” Jesus once said, “I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.” It really means this: you have got to “Bow down, sense and reason, faith only reigns here.” You have to come as a babe, you have to come as a child, if you are going to enter into the wonderful mysteries of redemption.

There was urgency in the religion of these shepherds. “They came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.” Now in all real religion there is urgency. Faith itself is spoken of as fleeing for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before us. If you and I realise our awful danger through sin and then by faith we see the refuge, there will be that urgency, fleeing for refuge to Him. When they came there, it must have been a solemn surprise. Well, they had already had their first surprise. “Unto you is born ... a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” But, “Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” O the humility of the incarnate Son of God lying in the manger! “Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor” – there you see His poverty – “that ye through His poverty might be rich.” “Lying in a manger.” And when the shepherds came there, they were not offended. They worshipped. They rejoiced. Their lives were never the same again. They “returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen.” That is real religion. There will be things you hear and things you see and you will glorify God for them. Now they were not offended. They did not stumble at that humble manger. Neither did the wise men later when they came to the house, a poor house and a poor man and a poor woman and a poor Child, and they worshipped Him as God. The greatest act of faith is to look upon a helpless Babe lying in a manger and to believe that He is true Almighty God, the Maker of heaven and earth. But if your religion is real, you will believe it and you will believe this: that your hope of heaven rests there.

“They came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.” Now have you ever noticed this, that as they went out, they told everyone of these wonderful things they had seen and heard? Yet we do not read of a single person who was affected by it. O that is the

solemnity of it! “Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” It is not just in the world. It is not just in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. It is in Strict Baptist chapels. “Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” “They came with haste.... And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this Child.” Yet we do not read of a single person who came along to the stable. It is no wonder we have that word concerning the Lord Jesus: “He marvelled because of their unbelief.”

But beloved friends, if you and I are ever going to get to heaven, we must have this spirit, this religion of the shepherds. What I mean is this: they left everything for Christ. There they were out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night, and the reason they kept watch over their flocks by night was because of the danger. Well, what could they do? Human reason would say, “Wait until the morning. Take the sheep and put them away safely in the fold. One or two stop and the others go.” They left these sheep and these lambs and went to behold the Lamb of God. And they did behold the Lamb of God, and they rejoiced “with joy unspeakable and full of glory.” It was a terrible sacrifice if those poor sheep and lambs were killed during the night. They had to leave all that. And there will come a time in your life when you have to leave everything for Christ’s sake, and I would like to see many of you being brought there by faith. There is only one thing will do it, or perhaps I will say two. One is if you first of all have that awful sense of eternity, it is made a tremendous sound; but then if you feel the love of Christ and a sweet view by faith of Christ and a sweet attraction in Christ, you will be made willing to leave everything for Christ’s sake.

So we see the shepherds as they leave their sheep and lambs and are there in Bethlehem looking into the manger and they behold the Lamb of God. There could be no more sacred employ for you and me this week than this: to be led by precious faith to Bethlehem there to behold the dear Lamb of God and to rejoice in Him, to find our hope, our salvation, our heaven there and to realise this, that unto us, even unto us is born a Saviour.

(If the Lord will, the evening sermon on the same text will be published next month.)