



Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 304

Going to Bethlehem

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 20th December, 2009**

Text: *"Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us" (Luke 2. 15).*

There is something most sacred, most sublime, in this lovely account of the shepherds and the angels and the glorious announcement of the Saviour's birth. Really, apart from inspired Scripture, is there anything to equal it, even in secular literature? This wonderful event, the coming of the eternal Son of God to earth, His matchless love, His matchless condescension, His birth at Bethlehem, the poverty of it, the humiliation of it, born in a stable, laid in a manger, though the almighty Maker of heaven and death. And all Bethlehem was silent, and the thing seemed to be unknown.

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." Now there is no doubt that like Simeon and Anna they were among those who were "waiting for the consolation of Israel," and they were not disappointed. Neither will you be, those of you here this night who are "waiting for the consolation of Israel." It came suddenly; it came unexpectedly. "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" – as well they might be. "And the angel said unto them, Fear not" – not just a *fear not* concerning their terror, concerning this celestial sight, but one of the great *fear nots* of Scripture, and spoken not just to these shepherds, but spoken to the church of God down to the end of time. "Fear not" – no cause for fear. "Rejoice and be glad! The Redeemer is come!" "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people" – to the Gentiles as well as the Jews, to be proclaimed to all people to the ends of the earth, and the Lord from all nations and all sorts gathering out a people for His praise.

"For unto you" – those who are waiting for the consolation of Israel then and now. "Unto you" – O may some of you by precious faith be able to lay hold on it tonight. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." He was the Son of God from everlasting. Now that He is incarnate, now that He is born, the first blessed name by which He is to be revealed is the *Saviour*. O that is why

He came, to save His people from their sins. He is the Saviour. It is that blessed relationship He bears to His people. He came for sinners. It is a Saviour that we need. “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” You notice that the angels did not say, Unto *us*, because, “Never did angels taste above, redeeming grace and dying love.” “Unto *you*.” But when the prophet took it up, speaking on behalf of the whole church of God, he did not say, “Unto *you*”; he said, “Unto *us*.” “Unto us” – sinners, unworthy as we are. Angels never sinned, but it is “*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 you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” Now that must have been a solemn shock to those shepherds. Perhaps they thought in a palace. “Lying in a manger.”

But then there was another surprise. “Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest.” That is why the Saviour came: for the honour and glory of His Father in heaven. “Glory to God in the highest.” And that should ever be the standard in the church of God to the end of time, and it should ever be the standard in our lives: the honour and glory of God. Now we felt that this morning. We were seeking the honour and glory of God in all that we did. [There had been a baptizing service in the morning.]

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” How this has been misunderstood. This peace on earth was not peace between nations. It was not that the earth should be freed from war. He came as the Prince of Peace, to make peace between a holy God and a guilty sinner. He came to make that peace by the blood of His cross. So He was born that He might die – and then to give that peace in the consciences of those who feel such trouble and concern about their unworthiness and their guilt. “On earth peace, good will toward men.” It does not mean a nice kind of fellow-feeling; a season of good will, people say. This is what was revealed to Moses: “The good will of Him that dwelt in the bush”; the good will and pleasure of God from everlasting to lost, ruined, guilty sinners.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.” Now it has been said, they left their sheep and their lambs to behold the Lamb of God. But it must have been a sacrifice. It must have been a trial to leave their sheep. I believe they left them in the Lord’s hand, committing them to His safe-keeping. But if the Lord deals with you and lovingly draws you toward Himself, there will be things you have to leave, people you have to leave, the world you have to leave, and there will be these things you have to give up for Jesus’ sake.

“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste.” In real religion there is that haste; there is a sense of urgency. If you really feel your need, it will be with haste, and if you have a glimpse of the Saviour, well, with haste you will go after Him. “They came with haste.” I was reading yesterday John Milton’s *Ode on the Morn of Christ’s Nativity*. That great English poet speaks there of the shepherds hastening and later the wise men hastening. May it be our desire to hasten along with them, and even to reach Bethlehem before them. So that is our burden and exercise and concern tonight.

They said, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem,” and tonight it is this: *Let us*. “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem.” They did then; may we do now. “*Let us now* go even unto Bethlehem.” You say, How can we go to Bethlehem? With the shepherds, it was probably less than a mile away. It was the middle of the night. They walked there. How can we go to Bethlehem? Well, it is by faith, God-given faith.

“Let us with humble hearts repair
(Faith will point out the road)
To little Bethlehem, and there
Adore our infant God.”

“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem.” Now lingering here, do you believe there is a power in faith? I was thinking of a very simple verse in one of our hymns. It is a hymn on faith by Dr. Watts and he says this concerning faith:

“It sets time past in present view,
Brings distant prospects home,

Of things a thousand years ago,
Or thousand years to come.”

Now that is the power of living faith, God-given faith. May it be given to us. May this be our privilege: “Let us now” – even in this latter day, even two thousand years later – “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem.” This coming week, may this be our desire. You will be busy; there will be all kinds of things; but may you seek to “go even unto Bethlehem,” and there adore your infant God. You will not find it easy.

We think of David’s desire. He spoke of Bethlehem. “Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!” And David’s three mighty men went to the well of Bethlehem, but they had to fight their way through against Philistines, enemies, and if you want to reach Bethlehem, to reach Him who is sweetly, solemnly typified by the well of Bethlehem, you will have to fight your way through against unbelief and circumstances and all kinds of things, but O to come *even* to Bethlehem, even where your Lord and Saviour and God is!

By faith, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass.” You wonder sometimes whether these dear shepherds were using the best expression. It was not very good language that they spoke: “This *thing* which is come to pass.” But the Lord would not discredit them for that. Often awakened souls do not know exactly what to say. They cannot always put it in the right words, in the exact words, but the Lord in heaven understands. “This thing which is come to pass.” Now their hearts and their feet were a lot better than their words. “This thing which is come to pass.”

O but they knew there had never been such a thing happened on earth before as the coming of the eternal Son of God into this world of sin and sorrow, and that is why with haste they went “even unto Bethlehem, to see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.” There was a revelation from heaven, a revelation from angels. We believe in a revealed religion, a revealed Christ. Now Christ is revealed in Scripture, and we want Him revealed to us personally as our Saviour and our God. It will not be an angel from heaven, but it will be the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart, opening your eyes, giving you real faith, drawing forth your affections. It may not be something very sudden as with the shepherds; it may be something very gentle and gradual and quiet – usually, though God is sovereign, but usually when you are reading

His holy Word, or when you are in prayer, or when you are listening to the preaching. Now seek it, long for it, pray for it, that this glorious truth, this glorious Saviour, the Lord might make known to you personally and savingly.

“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.” Well then, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem” *in wonder and amazement*. O do we really believe what we do believe, that,

“The eternal God, who built the earth and skies,
Takes on Him flesh, and in a manger lies”?

May we go to Bethlehem by faith with that sense of wonder and amazement. The old godly divines, the godly Puritans said this was the greatest stoop of all, a greater stoop than the Lord Jesus going to the cross, this greatest stoop of all, this matchless condescension, leaving heaven, leaving that glorious throne to be a Man of sorrows. The little old hymn: “Out of the ivory palaces, down to this world of woe.” Do we believe what we do believe? As I said in prayer, you will take your shoes from off your feet; the place where we stand is holy ground.

“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem.” But let us go in wonder and amazement at the love of God in sending His dear Son and the love of the Son of God in being willing to come, and that for sinners. “Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich.”

“And did the Holy” – *did He?* – “and the Just,
The Sovereign of the skies,
Stoop down to wretchedness and dust,
That guilty worms might rise?”

The wonder of it! “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem,” in amazement, in wonder.

“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem,” *in reverence and in godly fear*. May we always be kept in thinking, speaking, singing of the Saviour’s birth, to remember who He is: “He that can dash whole worlds to death, and make them when He please.” Yet He lies there. O the mystery of it, the impossibility of it! “Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh.” We cannot understand it, but we believe it. “Bow down, sense and reason, faith only reign here.” O but

if we do believe it, with what awe, with what reverence, with what tender fear we will approach that manger and “see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.”

“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem.” And may we be careful to go *in humility*. There is no place for pride here in that stable, in that manger. What do we read? “Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God.” He humbled Himself. He made Himself of no reputation. He was found in fashion as a man. The humility of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! O how He humbled Himself, not coming to reign as King, but to live that life here below in the home of a carpenter, and oftentimes having not where to lay His head. A view of this by faith will bring us into true humility at His feet, especially if you and I feel an interest in it: it was for you, it was for me; especially if you have a sense of your sin and your unworthiness; especially if you see that He was born that He might die; He came to Bethlehem that He might go to Calvary.

That word: “Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him.” As He lay in the manger, behold His work is before Him. He must be about His Father’s business. He must do His Father’s will, and He must magnify His Father’s law and make it honourable, and then He must go to the garden and the cross to suffer, bleed and die that accursed death that sinners might be saved. Now see it there even as He lies in the manger. “Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him,” as He shall triumph over sin, death, Satan, hell and the grave, rise triumphant, sit for ever on the throne, and see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied. “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing” by faith, and may the Holy Spirit lead us there. It will be with humility. You will be nothing; Christ will be everything.

“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem,” and let us go there and find in the dear Saviour *our only hope of heaven*. O that is why we want to be led by faith to Bethlehem. That is why we want the blessed Spirit to lead us to Bethlehem, that we might find the ground and the foundation of our hope in the dear Babe of Bethlehem. Now let us be clear: the birth of Jesus, His mysterious incarnation was not saving. I think in the Middle Ages some of those old medieval scholastics got it wrong. They over-emphasised the birth of Jesus, that the birth of Jesus united heaven and

earth together, and that was salvation. They over-emphasised it. The great point why we glory in the birth of the Lord Jesus, beloved friends: it was His coming, that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” If He had not been born, then He could not have died. And remember He once spoke that awful word. He said, “If I had not come.” You think of that and fill in all the things that happened. “If I had not come.” But blessed be His name, He did come. It is not in His *birth* that we find our hope: it is in the purpose of His birth we find our hope, and it is in the work He accomplished, the work for which He was born, the work for which He came that we find our hope. You cannot separate the manger from the cross. That manger is for ever vacated. He went to the cross and there He suffered, bled and died, and those glorious truths we sang at the beginning:

“Here it is we find our heaven,
While upon the Lamb we gaze.”

Now even in this, beloved friends, may we lift up our eyes and behold no man, save Jesus only as the ground and the only foundation for our hope. But we do not need another. It is a solid ground; it is a sure foundation. O what a wonderful thing that a guilty sinner is permitted, invited, welcome to flee for refuge to this hope set before us in the gospel, in the Person of our incarnate God, He who came to Bethlehem. “Let us,” therefore, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem,” and see our salvation in a Person, and that Person the glorious Son of God. What did Calvin say? “The Son of God became the Son of Man that the sons of men might become the sons of God.” There is a lot of good divinity there.

“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem.” And may the Holy Spirit lead us there, and may we be blessed with faith to go there. Let us now go even unto Bethlehem,” *in love*, to find it the place of love, to see the love of Christ to sinners and to love Him in return. O may we there in the glorious Person of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ see that “in this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.”

“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem.” And the wonderful thing, when they got there they were not offended, and the wise men who saw the star and it was revealed to them that a great and glorious King was born, when they entered that poor house and when they saw a poor man and a poor woman and a poor Child, they were not offended. And what did they do? “They worshipped Him.” Really, that is why the wise men came.

They said, “We have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him.”

Now beloved friends, as we are led by the Spirit of God “even unto Bethlehem,” as we are blessed with living faith to go there, may it be with a *desire to worship Him*. “Go worship at Immanuel’s feet.” I think of that word in the Psalms: “Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.” Now the shepherds did. It was not in a wonderful cathedral, a magnificent building; it was a very humble stable. But the beauty of holiness was there. I believe that Joseph was a holy man. We do not read much about him, but he was the one chosen out of the whole human race to care for the Lord Jesus in the days of His infancy. And Mary was a holy woman. If you read that account of all that it meant to Mary: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” O the grace that reigned there! But especially the holy Child Jesus. I believe those shepherds in that little stable by that manger worshipped the Lord in the beauty of holiness. May we too go even unto Bethlehem and worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

Worship is a wonderful thing. It is very difficult to explain what it is. It is better experienced than explained. It is really like that wonderful incense under the Levitical dispensation. There was never any substitute to be made for it. That is the fault of much present-day religion: it is trying to imitate these things. But it was “compound after the art of the apothecary.” There were all kinds of precious spices and they were all skilfully blended together and they made this beautiful, fragrant incense which ascended to heaven in the Old Testament sanctuary. Of course, it was a figure of true, spiritual worship in the gospel, in the New Testament. So what is there in true worship? “Go worship at Immanuel’s feet.” There will be so many things: humility, repentance, humble confession, faith, thanksgiving, gratitude, love, the tender fear of God, hope. Really it is a mingling together of all these graces of the Spirit, and of course it flows and it ascends heavenwards.

Now I would just say this. When you come to chapel week by week, you will not always really get a blessing and you will not always get a clear word and you will not always get a clear deliverance, but count those seasons dear when you know just a little spirit of worship. Perhaps it is even as you come through the doors of the sanctuary and you sit in your place, and like John Newton says, you “seem to breathe a different air.”

Or perhaps it is in singing the opening hymn and you seem to feel your affections drawn heavenwards, or perhaps in prayer, or perhaps in the preaching something softens your heart and then you “worship an incarnate God,” and hope and trust and at times believe “He saved you by His blood.” O to be a true worshipper! That is why we meet for the sacred, solemn worship of God.

In heaven there will not be any preaching, but there will be nothing but pure, uninterrupted worship. The Object of worship in heaven will be the same Object of worship that we have here in Bethel Chapel and those shepherds had that night in the stable at Bethlehem. O but an almighty Saviour, a glorified Saviour, a Lamb as it had been slain in the midst of the throne. “The Lamb is all the glory of Immanuel’s land.” May we know what it is even here on earth to draw near like the shepherds did. The psalmist said, “It is good for me to draw near to God.” And it is not good when we do not draw near. But we need that drawing, that pulling. “Draw me, we will run after Thee.” But then to come *even* unto Bethlehem, *even* where Jesus is. But then, beloved friends, may it be our mercy at last to be brought *even* to heaven.

“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.” And O may we worship there at His feet.

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Come, ye redeemed of the Lord,
Your grateful tribute bring;
And celebrate, with one accord,
The birthday of our King.

Let us with humble hearts repair
(Faith will point out the road)
To little Bethlehem, and there
Adore our infant God.

In swaddling bands the Saviour view!
Let none His weakness scorn;
The feeblest heart shall hell subdue,
Where Jesus Christ is born.

No pomp adorns, no sweets perfume
The place where Christ is laid;

A stable serves Him for His room,
A manger is His bed.
The crowded inn, like sinners' hearts,
(O ignorance extreme!)
For other guests, of various sorts,
Had room; but none for Him.
But see what different thoughts arise
In our and angels' breasts;
To hail His birth *they* left the skies,
We lodged Him with the beasts!
Yet let believers cease their fears,
Nor envy heavenly powers;
If sinless innocence be theirs,
Redemption all is ours.

Joseph Hart