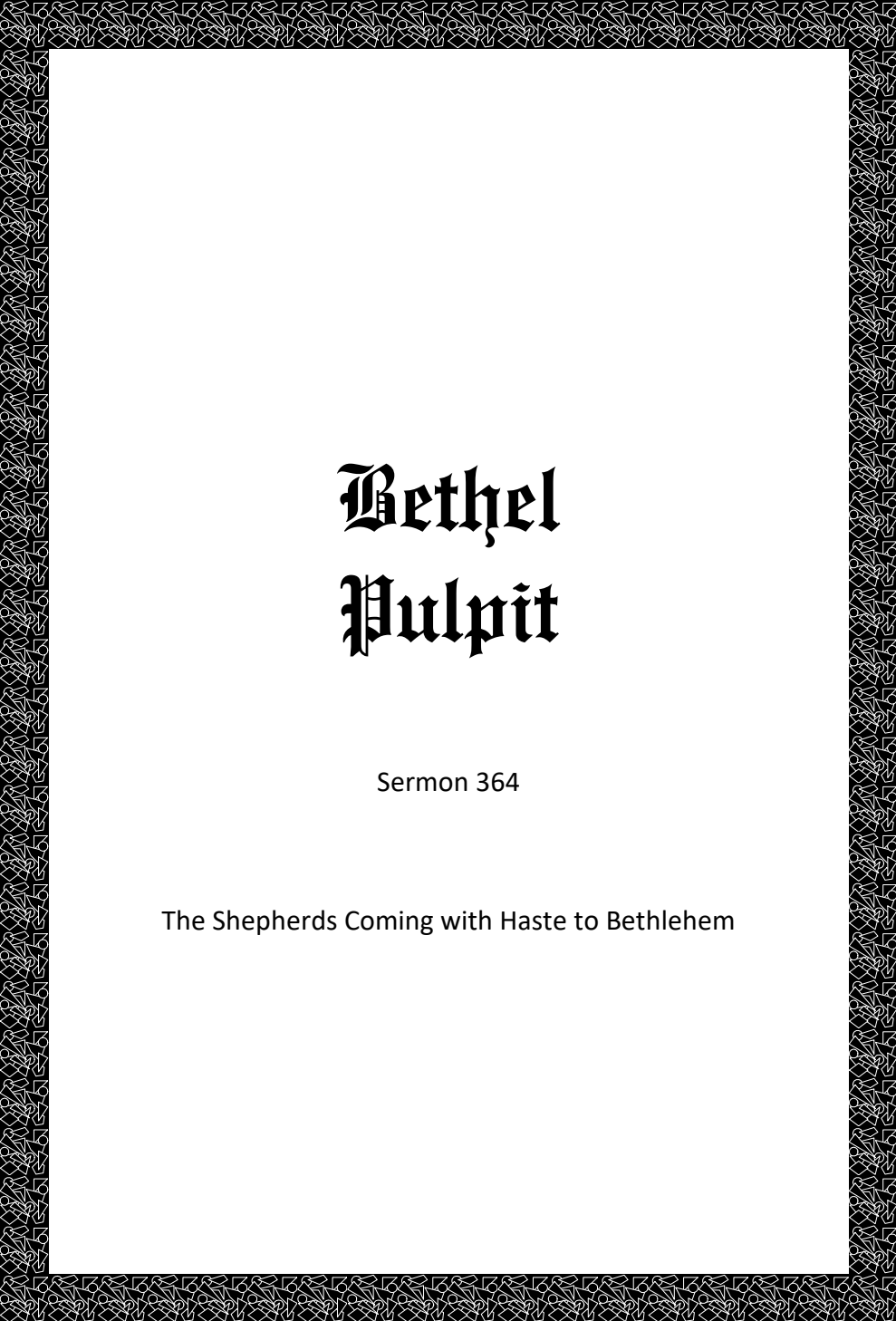




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 364

The Shepherds Coming with Haste to Bethlehem

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 21st December, 2014**

Text: *"And they came with haste" (Luke 2. 16).*

What a wonderful thing, the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, that the Son of God from all eternity should humble Himself and come into this world of sin and sorrow, and not in majesty to reign, but in humility! "He humbled Himself." And what greater humbling could there be than this: to be born of a poor woman, and for there to be no room in the inn, and to be born in a stable, and to be laid in a manger! It is no wonder our hymnwriter says, "O what matchless condescension!" But I believe a few of you have felt that word: "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" – the Son of God taking our nature, yet without sin, into lasting union with His divine Person. "Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness" – God and Man in one glorious Person, Man to suffer, God to save – the mystery of it, the wonder of it, that He could become Man without ceasing to be God, that He could be born into this world, born of a virgin, without ever contracting in any way original sin. And the purpose of it: the Godhead could not suffer, but He who did suffer and bleed and die was true, almighty God; and the Godhead could not shed blood, but He who shed His precious blood on the cross was true, almighty God.

There is always the shadow of the cross over the manger, that He was born that He might die, that He came to Bethlehem that He might go to Calvary.

"Here it is I find my heaven,
While upon the Lamb I gaze."

May there be some of you this morning with the shepherds going to Bethlehem and beholding the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.

There always seems to me to be something so beautiful in this account of the shepherds. "There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." These were the chosen ones, the only chosen ones to whom the glorious news was

brought, and that by an angel from heaven, that the Son of God was come. The Lord passed by the great and the mighty, which has ever been so. “Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith?” These shepherds – do you feel a love to them sometimes? Do you wish you knew more about them? We do not know how many there were, whether they were young or old. We do not know their names. I believe they were those who had the fear of God already in their heart; they were those who were waiting for the consolation of Israel, who were looking for redemption in Israel. And they were not disappointed. “They shall not be ashamed that wait for Me,” even if they wait long. “They shall not be ashamed that wait for Me.”

But doesn’t the Word of God emphasise it: not many great, not many mighty, not many noble. The hymnwriter and great poet, William Cowper, in one of his beautiful poems speaks of the very poorest of the poor in Olney where he lived, the lacemakers. They were so poor and they were ignorant while at that time the world was glorying in Voltaire in France. Cowper writes:

“Just knows, and knows no more, her Bible true,
A truth the brilliant Frenchman never knew.
And in that charter reads with sparkling eyes,
Her title to a treasure in the skies.”

O these shepherds – weren’t they honoured! Weren’t they blessed! And in the history of the church of God there have been many poor people, some exceedingly poor and some exceedingly weak in their intellect. We think of wonderful stories of Yeddie, and poor Joseph, and people like that.

I understand that my highly-esteemed and godly predecessor, the pastor here, Mr. J.C. Fookes, there was an occasion in his life when he had a real burden. He badly wanted one or two very able, useful young men in the church and that was his burden before the Lord, that the Lord would bless Bethel with some young men who were of great ability to be a help. He wrestled in prayer for it. Soon afterwards there was a knock at the door, and he opened it and there was a woman. Apparently she was not only the poorest of the poor in the congregation, but she was an ignorant woman. He said, “What do you want?” Well, she had come to tell her little tale. She wanted to join the church. The dear, godly man was

offended. But the Lord came to him with such a rebuke: “Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith?” Didn’t she prove a godly member! Wasn’t she a shining example of the grace of God! Our old friend Mr. Gurney told me that on one occasion at the end of the service when the minister sat down, she shouted across the chapel, “Fred, I shall get to heaven!” “Rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom.”

It was to these shepherds that the glorious tidings were given: “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For *unto you*” – may the Lord speak that to you here – “*unto you* is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” And then there was the host of angels bright and glorious singing, “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. And they came with haste.”

I do not know whether you find that year by year something different arrests you. Now this really arrested me in reading it: these shepherds “*came with haste.*” It was the only thing that mattered to them. And if you and I are taught by grace and feel our need as sinners, and eternity before us, this will be the only thing that matters, that an almighty Saviour has come, and we need Him, and we cannot do without Him, and we too will make haste to come to Bethlehem. What was it? It was to find the infant Saviour. And we too will go to Bethlehem and – have you ever done it, what we sang just now (hymn 41)? We will follow Him from Bethlehem. We will follow Him to the River Jordan and the temptation in the wilderness, and follow Him in His teaching, and to Calvary, and to the grave, and to the Mount of Olives, and up to heaven.

“We’ll trace the pure footsteps of Jesus, our Lord,
And glory in Him whom proud sinners abhorred.”

“And they came with haste.” Now I wonder what a lot of people would have done if there had been angels coming from heaven. Would they have talked together and said, Were we dreaming? Or would they have said, Was this Gabriel, or that other archangel Michael? There were all kinds of things they could talk about, but they did not. “They came

with haste.” From the shepherds’ fields in Bethlehem up to the town they came. They could not get there quick enough! “They came with haste.” It was the only thing that mattered.

We read once or twice in the gospels of people coming with haste – the only thing that mattered. I will just mention two. Zacchaeus up in the tree, and he was brought to feel his need, and there was the Saviour, and He said, “Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house. And he made haste, and came down.” It was the only thing that mattered. “One thing is needful.” “Jesus, engrave it on my heart.”

And the other: those godly women who were at the grave of the Lord Jesus on the resurrection morning. The angel said, “Go quickly, and tell His disciples.” It is the only thing that matters. The Saviour is risen to die no more. He is risen almighty to save. And we read, “They departed quickly.” O to have a religion like the shepherds and Zacchaeus and the godly women on the resurrection morning when only one things matters!

“They came with haste.” Now the second thing: there was *urgency in their religion*. It was urgent. I believe they ran there. And when the Lord begins to work in our hearts and teaches us our need, there will be urgency in our religion. What do you make of that word when the Lord Jesus said, “Strive to enter in at the strait gate”? Now that is urgency. Mr. Frank Gosden said, “You will not get to heaven *because* you strive, but you will not get to heaven *unless* you do strive.” O there is an urgency in real religion.

In the tenth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews the apostle is giving quite a few exhortations to the people of God, and he just puts this little piece in: “So much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” Now when we come towards the end of the year, we are reminded that whether we are hastening or not, time is hastening. Time is hastening to its conclusion, when we read that the angel shall stand and shall declare, Let time be no longer (Rev. 10. 6), and then a never-ending eternity, and where will you be, and where will I be? You cannot take these matters for granted. We are born that one day we might die. We only have a little time here on earth. Man was created for the honour and glory of God. We have not lived our lives to the honour and glory of God. We are lost. We

need a Saviour before our end comes. There is an urgency in it. O but if you are awakened,

“Fly, then, awakened sinners, fly;
Your case admits no stay;
The fountain’s opened now for sin;
Come, wash your guilt away.”

“They came with haste.” O the urgency there is in real religion! You will not take it for granted. You will not think there is plenty of time. The language Scripture uses, things like “fleeing for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.” Why do we flee for refuge? Because we know our danger.

Most of you know the *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Bunyan’s Pilgrim when he was awakened, heard that word, “Flee from the wrath to come,” and there he was, his burden on his back, and his fingers in his ears because the world was calling him back, and hastening from the world as a city of destruction, crying, “Life, life, eternal life.”

There is this haste in real religion. It does not mean people always bustling or being in a hurry. It certainly does not mean being of a hasty temper. But it is the importance of vital godliness, the necessity of being right. These shepherds – it meant everything to them. The gospel had been made known to them, and it had an effect, and the effect was that they hastened to the place where the Saviour was found.

“They came with haste.” Now the third thing. There was an attraction, *a sweet attraction*, an attraction in what they had heard. I do not think they could get there quickly enough. It is a great point – I often speak to you about it – this attraction in Christ. There was something which drew them; there was something which pulled them. They had heard these wonderful tidings: “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord,” and there was an attraction in it. It drew them.

Now we have not had an angel come down from heaven into this chapel. Some people think if an angel came from heaven, everything would be clear. Well, that is what the rich man said, but the Lord said even if an angel came or one came back from the dead, they would not believe. We have not an angel from heaven, but “we have ... a more sure

word of prophecy.” In one way we are more favoured even than the shepherds. You say, How can that be? Well, they only knew of the Saviour’s birth and the promise that He was the Saviour, but we have “a more sure word of prophecy.” We read of His holy life, how He has brought in an everlasting righteousness for sinners who have none of their own. We read how He went to Gethsemane and Calvary and died, “the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.” We have the glorious gospel in all its fulness. The veil of the temple has been rent in twain. Christ has cried, “It is finished,” and died and ascended to heaven an almighty Saviour. In one way we are more favoured than the shepherds. We have a more sure word of prophecy in the gospel, in the written Word, than even these angels from heaven. Do you believe that? But is there that attraction? Are you and I this morning – we trust by faith, we trust as constrained by the love of Christ – are we hastening to Bethlehem, to a dear Saviour and Redeemer? Are we hastening to Him? Is there that sweet attraction?

Because the Person of Christ will always separate, always divide – divide the world, divide the religious world, and it did even here. You say, What do you mean? Well, these shepherds, when they had seen what had happened, “they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this Child.” They went everywhere round Bethlehem, to friends and foes, neighbours, whoever it was, and they told them about this wonderful birth and this wonderful Baby and this wonderful Saviour, but we do not read of a single one who took any notice. We do not read of a single one going to that stable, even out of inquisitiveness, not even to see if what the shepherds said was true.

As it was then, so it is now. “He is despised and rejected of men.” He was despised at His birth. There was no room for Him in the inn, but He was despised by the people. This was the nation waiting for the Messiah. “He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not.” It is the same today. There was the separation even at His birth. All in Bethlehem must have been talking about it. When the shepherds told them, they must have gone telling other people, and we do not read of any effect at all.

It is a solemn thing that the truth of the Lord Jesus as set forth in the gospel always separates. To some it means everything and to some it means nothing at all. Tell me, beloved friends this morning, a Saviour born in Bethlehem – “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?” Are you going to go home and forget all about it?

O but these shepherds! “With joy we hasten to the place,” if only we might our loved Redeemer meet, if only we might find Him, if only we might claim Him as our own! O but this attraction in the Saviour! And they left their sheep and their lambs. It could not have been easy, but I believe they were blessed with such faith, it was not just that it was the only thing that mattered, but they did not bother with the poor sheep. I believe they were blessed with grace to leave them in the hands of their God who had so blessed them that He would not let any harm come to them.

There was that attraction in Christ. “I, if I be lifted up” – in the gospel – “will draw all men unto Me.” “I will run the way of Thy commandments, when Thou shalt enlarge my heart.” It is leaving the world, and it is leaving your idols, and it is leaving everything, and it is the one thing that matters. But this solemn line of demarcation! It struck me this year as never before: these shepherds were telling everyone the wonder of it, the love of it and what it meant, and we do not read that anyone took any notice of it at all. But “*they* came with haste.” It was the only thing that mattered. There was this sweet attraction in it. There was the urgency of vital godliness in it.

And fourthly, there was *true zeal*. There is a true zeal in real religion. We have heard so much of a false zeal, a zeal without knowledge, “zeal extinguished to a spark,” and blind zeal, but there is a real zeal, and even openly. We have it in some of our hymns, even about coming to the house of God.

“Yes, with a cheerful zeal,
We haste to Zion’s hill,
And there our vows and honours pay.”

That is the spirit of the shepherds.

“With joy we hasten to the place
Where we our Saviour oft have met” –

or where we our Saviour oft would meet. In my younger days I have known what it was even literally to run to chapel.

O but this zeal for the house of God! Sometimes when we cannot say anything else: “Lord, I have loved the habitation of Thy house, and the place where Thine honour dwelleth.” O to have more zeal for the honour and glory of God and more love to the Saviour! But this longing. They wanted to be near Him. They wanted to be where He was. And that is it. Sometimes we come to the end of everything and what can we say, what dare we say, what must we say? It comes out something like this:

“Lord, where Thou art, there would I be,
And see Thy lovely face;
And sit to all eternity,
In chanting forth Thy grace.”

O the wonders of that night in Bethlehem, and these dear, blessed, favoured shepherds. May their religion be yours and mine, because they found Him and they were not disappointed, and though it was only a manger and stable, they were able to rejoice in God as their salvation.

“They came with haste.”