

The Understatement of All Time

Luke 2:1–7

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THERE'S a scene in Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* in which a British Army officer walks calmly through camp while the war rages on around him. He enters the medic tent and sees another officer sitting calmly, reading a book, but without a leg. The main officer asks him, "How does it feel?" The injured officer—in typical British humor—says, "Stings a bit." And that's what we call an understatement!

The *Book of Common Prayer* calls today "The Nativity of our Lord, or The Birth-Day of Christ commonly called Christmas." With a billion Christians we celebrate. What do we celebrate? That the eternal Triune God, who planned to save us sinners, did so by sending the Son of God to take to himself a human nature in the womb of the virgin Mary and to be born and so become the divine-human Savior. We celebrate in the words of the carol, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate Deity."

But the Gospel writer Luke describes this miraculous and redemptive event in such a way that it comes off as *the understatement of all time*. The

Son of God became a son of man; Light entered darkness; Life came to the dead; but Luke says it in such a hushed tone.

The Simplicity of the Narrative

We see this in *the simplicity of the narrative* compared to our expectations of fireworks and flashing lights! **In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus—really, you’re telling us about a man who reigned from 30BC to AD14? That all the world should be registered** (v. 1). Okay, but it was common practice for the Romans to use this word for **world** (*oikoumene*) to describe the inhabited world of the Roman Empire. A **registration** (v. 2) like this was like our national census: name, occupation, land owned, and family members. So far, it’s so simple. Luke informs us that **this was the first registration** to distinguish it from another that took place a little later in AD6 that led to a tax revolt (see Acts 5:37). And this **first census** took place **when Quirinius was governor of Syria** (v. 2). And so as the custom was **all went to be registered, each to his own town** (v. 3). So this meant **Joseph...went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child** (vv. 4-5).

So simple; so unexciting. But isn't this how God works? This encourages us ordinary people that God uses the ordinary to perform extraordinary acts. You see, throughout the centuries and millennia God had been orchestrating the course of human history to prepare for the advent of his eternal Son in human flesh. And as we've seen, it's been four hundred years since God has spoken in what we call the Old Testament. Israel was weary and longed for rest. And now his forerunner, John, had been born. As Paul would say, "the fullness of time had come" (Gal. 4:4). Here's what one writer said: "In a few verses – written simply, in a matter-of-fact and natural way – Luke here relates the tremendous and all-important event. The extreme simplicity of the narrative forms the strongest contrast to the stupendous significance of the occurrence that is recounted."¹ And unbeknownst to the great Caesar Augustus, what he did was used by the one true God to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5. Caesar thought he was doing a census of the entire inhabited world, but all his census did was actually prepare the world for their Savior. Caesar was laying the foundation to generate revenue for his temporal building plans all the while he was laying the foundation for the eternal kingdom of God to enter this world!

¹ Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 99.

The Poverty of the Birth

This simplicity of the narrative coupled with *the poverty of the birth* also shows us how understated Luke makes everything seem to be. We read **and while they were there in Bethlehem the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn² son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.** What's a manger, children? "Away in a manger, no crib for a bed," we sing. If he didn't have a crib, where did he lay? A manger was a generic term for a place where animals were kept. So they went to this **inn** to stay for the census and those who traveled could lay their animals outside in the manger. But this is not necessarily a posh red barn with a hayloft for a penthouse! In fact, ancient tradition from as early as Justin Martyr, writing about AD150, says that the **manger** Jesus was born in was "a certain cave near the village."³ A manger is just a place for animals—a cave, an overhang on the face of a hill, a little wooden roof under which to get some cover from the elements. Martin Luther once asked, "Why [was Jesus] not [born] in a cradle, on a bench, or on the ground? Because they had no cradle, bench, table, board, nor anything whatever except the manger of the oxen. That was the first throne

² Luke uses *prototokon* not *monogene*.

³ *Dialog with Trypho*, 78.

of this King. There in a stable, without man or maid, lay the Creator of all the world.”⁴ Yet no one recognized him for who he was! Luther said, “Oh, what a dark night it was in Bethlehem that this light should not have been seen.”⁵

And why was Jesus born here? **Because there was no place for them in the inn** (v. 7). It wasn’t like the royal family of Joseph and Mary were coming to town and someone willingly gave up their room. It wasn’t like the Presidential Suite was reserved for such an occasion. It wasn’t like Joseph could pull out his Platinum Level credit card, swipe it, and all their troubles went away! **Because there was no place for them in the inn!** Imagine that, the Son of God while in his mother’s womb processes down the highways and streets of the Promised Land and especially David’s city of Bethlehem, but no one gave up their place for the eternal Son! The Creator began his life homeless. He identifies with the despised of society, with the lowly who have to sleep up against empty storefronts, and the weak who cannot help themselves. Here is your Savior!

The Irony of the Event

And it’s this simplicity and this poverty that leads to *the irony of the event* that shows just how understated Luke’s Gospel truly is. The Son of God

⁴ *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*, 31–32.

⁵ *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*, 30.

could have come to save us cloaked in royal majesty and surrounded by myriads of angels as security guards. He could have dwelt in a palace with all the power and great authority that entails. As J.C. Ryle said, though,

But to become poor as the very poorest of mankind, and lowly as the very lowliest—this is a love that passes knowledge. It is unspeakable and unsearchable. Never let us forget that through this humiliation Jesus has purchased for us a title to glory. Through His life of suffering, as well as His death, He has obtained eternal redemption for us. All through His life He was poor for our sakes, from the hour of His birth to the hour of His death.⁶

The irony is that “he who clothes the whole world...is wrapped up in common linen.” Why? “That we might be able to receive the best robe.” He whose glory fills the heavens is “confined in the narrow space of a rude manger.” Why? “That He may give us ample room in the joys of His heavenly kingdom.” He who sits at the Father’s right hand, finds no room in an inn. Why? “That He might prepare for us in His Father’s house many mansions.”⁷

What an understatement! Let us conclude with this thought from 2 Corinthians 8:9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” Amen.

⁶ Ryle, 52.

⁷ Bede in Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 67, 68.