

Voices of the Nativity*

Luke 2: 2-7

The Birth of Jesus

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Voice of a Roman Soldier

They came to me to register their ordinariness.

That is the purpose of this census. Not to show how much wealth there is to exploit. Not to count heads. But to demonstrate once and for all that we are in charge.

They line up in front of people like me and register their ordinariness.

They make a mark at our disposal. They are at our disposal.

These people need to understand that it is us who have the big ideas, not them.

We give them concessions – they can worship their puny god, they can keep their holy places “pure” – but they are to be in no doubt what power really looks like.

These people believe that their god will deliver them. From what? Us, I suppose.

They call us oppressors, exploiters, all the easy names. They talk of salvation and hope. Every now and then a few of them rebel. Because the weak like things simple – good versus evil, black versus white.

As if we are the enemy.

The true enemy is superstition. We bring civilisation and development.

We lift them out of superstition. When they pray for salvation they are rejecting the light of reason.

They are fools. They line up and give their names and professions. Peasants, the lot of them. None more pathetic than the carpenter and his pregnant wife.

He stood there and could barely mumble his name. His wife shook with pain. It was a disgrace that he couldn't provide for her better.

Bethlehem.

The city of kings, they call it. This carpenter was in Bethlehem because he was descended from King David. Or some such nonsense.

You want a metaphor for how ridiculous this country is? This city no longer produces kings. It produces scared little men and women like the carpenter and his wife. Pieces in other people's games.

I feel sorry for the kid this couple will have. To be born in poverty and superstition. It would be better if he were never born.

Music

Voice of a Villager

Hospitality.

It is part of our faith. We are supposed to be hosts as God is host – to welcome strangers as God welcomes the stranger in the land.

As if it were that simple. A Roman told me once that in his language “hospitality” comes from the same root as both enemy and guest.

Now that makes sense. Because there is nothing pure about hospitality.

Someone always wants something. Can anything be freely given? Freely received?

I don’t know why I ignored my instinct when the couple knocked on my door.

There’d been dozens of them. All day, every day, for a week.

Forced to travel for the sake of a census.

I was sympathetic of course. The regime was making ridiculous demands on decent people. But I had nothing. I had barely enough for my own family.

I’d told most of these refugees to head to the camp at the edge of town. The conditions were terrible, but it was the best we could offer. Our community was overwhelmed.

It was late and when I heard the knock it was all I could do not to tell them just to clear off. Though not so politely. But they kept knocking. Demanding hospitality I thought. I thought of what my Roman friend had said about hospitality.

I went and answered and in I was.

“Sorry, we have got no room, blah...” The couple simply stood there and waited for me to finish.

They were so exhausted. The man desperate. The woman – well the girl – breathless. She was in pain.

I thought she was hurt. Then I saw she was extremely pregnant.

The man said, “Please.”

I was angry. I felt manipulated. Couldn’t they see I had nothing? Couldn’t they get it that I’d had people like them banging on my door all day for a week?

They stared at me.

“I can’t help. Sorry,” I said.

“My wife,” the man said, pointing at her belly.

I was sick of sob stories. I began to shut the door.

“Wait.” It was the girl. It was the shock of hearing a female voice that stopped me. The women don’t usually speak.

“Please,” she said. “For the baby. Somewhere dry. For when it comes.”

I looked at her. She was a kid, but she was tough. She had nothing left except a determination to get the baby born.

I stared at her.

Nodded.

I showed them to a shelter out back. It was adequate. It was dry.

“You have blessed God,” the girl said. “When he comes, he will bless you.”

Music

Voice of Mary

I wish I could stop it all here. Just now. Where it is only Joseph and the baby and me.

I wish I could stop it all here. Now that the pain is gone and the baby is out of me and I have him in my arms asleep. All of us shattered.

Joseph keeps smiling and weeping. I doze – dreaming I am holding a child – and I wake to find I am.

I wish I could stop it all here. Just hold the world back. To simply enjoy knowing this child is ours. Is mine. That he is special as he is.

If I didn't believe what I'd been promised, it wouldn't make any difference. I'd still say this child is God. As much as any child is God.

I don't care what he is going to become. I don't care if he is a god or not. I just care that he is here with us. He's made it. He is safe. And he is ours.

Music

Voice of Joseph

It is stupid, but I hadn't thought he'd be so light. I can fit him in the palms of my hands. If I couldn't see him, I'd barely believe he was there.

My son. That is what Mary says I should call him. My son.

And from the moment he appeared, as he screamed in his tiny voice, I knew he was.

What's happened is too big for me. For my world. Mary talks of God and miracles. Mary says this little one will save us all.

He's already done that for me.

I could have turned my back and let Mary go when she told me she was pregnant.

No one would have blamed me. They would have said it was what she deserved.

She would have fallen so far.

I am still not sure what I believe. But I believe in Mary. And I believe in this child.

He is so helpless. He is so beautiful. Is this what it is like to hold god in your hands?

Music

Luke 2: 8-20

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace!"

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they

made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Voice of an Angel

People are unpredictable. One day you are fed honey cakes. Another you are wrestled to the ground and expected to pronounce a blessing.

I thought I I'd have to threaten this lot – this gang of filthy men and women who live in the wilderness and spend far too much time alone with animals. A rough lot, who attack first and ask questions later.

I thought I'd have to show them magic tricks. Lights in the sky. A heavenly choir.

I thought I might need to take a sword to one of their throats.

Instead they were intrigued. I saw them delight in my appearance.

There is a reason shepherds have always been closely associated with God and the kingdom. They live on the edges and in the lonely places.

They understand how it is for god. They know god is most at home away from the palaces and the glory. They know that God is at work in the dark and the dark is dazzling and beautiful.

They saw me and they knew that I was gloriously strange. They knew that God had come to be with them.

After that it was easy. No need for magic. No need for heavenly choirs. I strode up to their leader – an old woman with hardly any teeth – and pointed out the way. She nodded. As if in that moment she was in touch with the shepherds of old who'd spent long nights in conversation with angels.

She smiled her toothless grin and said, "So this is it, then? The poor shall see god and God will see them?"

I nodded. She placed a hand in mine and said, "Lead on."

Music

Voice of a Shepherd

We had no business being here. Our place is out in the hills and the wilderness. Or guarding the sheepfold.

The glora we know is seen in clear night skies, the stars uncountable. The goodness we know is in a job well done.

It gets cold out on the hills. And every one sees strange things. In the dark a bush becomes a wolf.

But I have never seen the stars become angels before.

But we have seen another glory too.

We know we are not always loved, us shepherds. Some say we're not respectable. Others think we are the symbol of god's love. No one ever quite sees us for what we are: women and men trying to do a difficult job, wanting a bit of respect.

But that's the glory of what we have seen.

Not the glory of a sky turned to song. Not the glory of the kings and queens of old. Not even the glory told in the scriptures.

We saw a child.

And the child saw us.

That night we were not disrespectable. We were not the symbols of Israel. We were just men and women.
Because that's what a baby does.
He is not interested in anything other than being loved and cared for. He responds to love.
The parents let me take him in my hands. My unwashed and greasy hands.
I held the holy child, and the holy child held me.

Music

My Christmas wish for us today is that we will experience holding the holy, and the holy holding us – in love.
Amen.

*Idea and significant parts of the texts taken from "A Star-filled Grace" by Rachel Mann.