



OPENING THE BIBLE DECEMBER 2008



Before you begin, please read the notes on the back page.



READ THE FOLLOWING PASSAGE (*set for Christmas Day and the following Sunday.*)

Luke 2.1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph 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. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And 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.

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 Saviour, 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 among those whom he favours!'

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.

SOME BACKGROUND:

The Birth of Christ is only recorded by Luke and Matthew. Mark and John say nothing about it, and there is no other reference to it in the New Testament. It wasn't nearly as important to the early church as his crucifixion and resurrection. The stories they do tell are crammed with symbolic detail. The writers aren't trying to give us factual accounts of Jesus' birth, but rather to convey the spiritual truths, that somehow in Christ God himself has come among us. (Matthew and Luke's stories don't agree and can't be "mashed together" though that doesn't stop us trying to

Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David, who had been a shepherd boy when he was anointed as the future king of Israel. There was a belief at the time of Christ that the Messiah – a new King David – would be born there too. It is significant that the first to hear the news of Jesus' birth are shepherds, just like David. God had promised in the Old Testament that he would be a true shepherd to his people (e.g. Ezekiel 34.11)

Angels are the messengers of God in the Bible (from *angelos*, Greek for messenger). In the Bible, they are not portrayed as gentle, white winged figures with tinsel halos, but awesome creatures, sometimes warriors. Their first words are nearly always, "do not be afraid!"

Stable. There is no stable mentioned here, just a manger, nor does it say that the manger Jesus was laid in had any connection with the inn where there was no room. It may have been a feeding trough in a field or a cave, or in a room in a house shared with animals.

READING THE BIBLE WITH YOUR HEAD, HEART AND HANDS

We need to read the Bible with the whole of ourselves if it is really to make an impact on our lives. In our Bible studies, therefore, we'll be asking three sorts of questions.

- **"Head" Questions** - *What do I think about this passage?*
(E.g. what do I know about the background and what is going on in the passage? What might I need to find out about it? How does it fit with other bits of the Bible?)
- **"Heart" Questions** - *What do I feel about it?*
(E.g., are there things here that comfort, shock or puzzle me? Who do I identify with? How do I think I would have reacted if I had been there?)
- **"Hands" questions** - *What should I do about it? (E.g., are there things I need to do in response to this passage – people to pray for? Action to take? Changes to make in my life?)*

TO TALK ABOUT:

What do you think about this passage? (“Head” Questions)

Look carefully at this passage. It is so well known that we often fail to see what it really says. (You may like also to read Matthew 2 to compare it.)

1. List the people, animals and settings it mentions and try to build up an accurate picture of the events it describes. What does it say about the weather, for example, or the time of day when Jesus is born?
2. Are there things that are missing that you expected to find (like the stable?) or things there that you didn't expect which surprise you?
3. It seems unlikely that either of the nativity stories in the Bible are accurate accounts of the birth of Christ. Does this matter to you?

What do you feel about this passage (“Heart” Questions)

1. Imagine the scene at the manger as the shepherds come to see the child. Try to see it in as much detail as you can. Where are you – how close to the child? What do you want to say and do?
2. Try to imagine what it might have been like for Mary to give birth in circumstances like this. What might she be thinking and feeling?
3. The good news in this story comes to people who were outside what would have been regarded as respectable society – an unmarried mother, her fiancé and a bunch of shepherds. What might be an equivalent group of people today? What reaction do you think they might get if they came to church and announced that they had found God amongst them?

What might you do in response to this passage? (“Hands” Questions)

1. Think about the way you and your family celebrate Christmas. How do you try to bring “good news” to others in your Christmas celebrations? (For example, including people who might be alone, giving gifts to charity, using the time together as a family positively...)
2. Mary pondered the events she had been part of (vs. 19). How can you carve out time to ponder as you prepare for Christmas? You might like to commit yourself to 5 minutes of stillness each day, or come along to our Advent “Breathing Space” Communion services (Thursdays at 8pm – Dec 4,11,18)
3. Just as the baby Jesus needed to be nurtured once he was born so that he would grow up well, God's life in us needs nurturing too. What do you plan to do after Christmas that will help your faith to grow?

PRAYER FOR THE MONTH – A carol from Haiti

What is Christmas?

It is living in hope, holding out the hand of reconciliation,
accepting strangers, helping one another to do good,
wiping away tears.

Every time love is given, distress is relieved
and someone is made happy,
God comes down from heaven and brings us light.
That is Christmas.

NOTES

- *You can use this Bible study on your own or you can get together with a friend or two to talk it through together. If you would like to be part of a group and need help to find others to meet with, please let me know.*
- *You don't have to be a Bible expert to take part. All you need is to be open to listening honestly to God, to yourself and to others.*
- *The passage chosen for study each month will be one of those set for the Sunday readings in the coming month. I can't guarantee that whoever is preaching will focus on it, but there is a good chance that we will do so – if you are meeting with others you may like to get together before the date for which the reading is set.*
- *I have printed out the Bible passage we are looking at in full, but you'll need a Bible to hand as well to get the most out of this study. In church we read from the New Revised Standard Version, but any good modern translation will do – e.g. New International Version, or Good News Bible. Many people love the language of the old "Authorised" version (King James Bible), but it is not always easy to understand and is not always as accurate a translation as modern versions, since translators now have access to a greater range of literary and historical research.*
- *Bible references are written "Book, Chapter, Verse" – so Mark 13.3 means the book of Mark, Chapter 13, verse 3.*
- *If there is anything you would like to ask or to say – an unresolved question or issue that has arisen from this study – you can send it to me by email or post, or write it on a slip of paper and post it in the box labelled "Opening the Bible - feedback" on the red table at the back of church. If it is a question or point which it would be good to share, I will include a response in the following month's study sheet – I won't identify the questioner.*

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Copies of each month's Bible study notes can be found at the back of
church or downloaded from the Church website.

www.sealpeterandpaul.com