

Guest Preacher - Mr Donald Macaulay

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Preacher: Mr. Donald Macaulay

[0 : 00] Turn back then to the second passage that we read, the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2. And you can read again at the beginning.

There are several things to meditate on here, but I want to concentrate this evening with the Lord's help and guidance, particularly on the appearance of the shepherds.

The appearance and the vision that the shepherds are given. In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Now, it's quite amazing in some ways that we have so little detail of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ in Scripture.

The passages that we read are the only references that there are. Neither Mark nor John mention them at all.

[1 : 11] And if you were paying careful attention to the reading in Matthew, you will see that Matthew's real purpose is to show how the Old Testament Scriptures are fulfilled by the birth of Jesus.

And that is, of course, Matthew's theme throughout most of his Gospel. But Luke's approach is quite different. You remember Luke, the beloved physician, as Paul calls him, is also a historian.

And he very carefully catalogues for us much information, not only throughout his Gospel, but especially in the Book of Acts.

And the prologue to Luke, as he writes himself, and you find a similar prologue in the Book of Acts. Ah, dear. It's amazing how pages stick together.

And he writes in Luke 1, And as much as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things that you have been taught.

[2 : 43] And therefore, without going into who Theophilus was, we have no real knowledge of that, but we find the same dedication at the beginning of the Book of Acts.

Some think that it simply means man of God. Theo is the Greek word for God. Theophilus, man of God. Theophilus, man of God. It could be a sort of anagram that is written for all the congregations who would eventually read this gospel.

But again, that's highly disputed in many places. But Luke's purpose is very, very clear. He wants to write an orderly account.

And he wants to take this from eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word who were there from the beginning. And therefore, it's quite clear that when he writes at the beginning of chapter 2, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

The first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria, that he is giving us historical detail in order to be able to fix, more or less, the period of time when this baby was born.

[4 : 08] Now, we don't know exactly when that was. The decree from Caesar Augustus was reckoned to have been sent out around about between 3 and 5 BC, before Christ, before Christ's birth, according to our modern dating system.

When exactly the news of that would reach Palestine, or Israel, whatever you want to call it, would probably have been up to six months to a year later.

And for everything to be made, the registration, that is, a census was being taken. And the purpose of the census was for taxation.

Caesar Augustus is the second Roman emperor. And he has taken the title Caesar from Julius Caesar, the first Roman emperor who had actually named him as the emperor.

This is Octavian for those who are interested in Roman history. And this census requires, then, that people go to their own towns.

[5 : 18] That is, presumably, by this, he means the towns where they had been born. And that way, we find that Joseph heads with Mary to Bethlehem.

Now, it's curious that Luke, being such a careful historian, makes no mention whatsoever of the visit of the wise men.

That's totally missing from his account. It is only Matthew who gives us that particular detail. But Luke gives us other details that Matthew does not, of course, bother with.

Many people have the idea that Mary is not only pregnant, but actually gives birth almost immediately when they arrive in Bethlehem.

But that is not necessarily the case. If you look at verse 6, you see this very clearly. While they were there.

[6 : 29] Now, we don't know how long they were there. The only clue that we have to that is Matthew's account of the visit of the wise men.

And it would seem by that time, as Matthew details, that the wise men found the house where they were living, that some time has passed.

But in the details that are given to us here, there are some very interesting things for us to consider.

I'm sure we're all familiar with the Christmas story. I mean, it wouldn't be Christmas without a Christmas sermon on this particular chapter.

And I'm sure this particular chapter will be read in many churches over perhaps the course of today. And not only today, but those who have perhaps watch night services, as they're called, these passages will be read.

[7 : 31] And they're normally read very often at what we call Advent time as well. The birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. And if time permits, there are other interesting things in that particular passage that I might go into later on.

But I want to concentrate for a while particularly with you on the shepherds. At verse 8. In the same reason, there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night.

Now, one of the great debates that takes place at this time of year, perhaps at other times of year, but especially at this time of year, is when was Jesus actually born?

Now, I'm sure all of us know that it was not on the 25th of December. That that is not the birth date of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But then a secondary question comes up from that. For Luke to be so careful with the other details that he gives here, to allow locations and dates to be worked out, why is it that neither of the Gospels that deal or that mention with the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, why do they not give the date of his birth?

[8 : 58] I wonder if you've ever thought about that. We know exactly the date of his death. We know the crucifixion details.

Each Gospel gives them to us. But we are ignorant of the date of his birth. And perhaps you can figure out from that that the reason that most commentators give, and I tend to agree with them here, is that what we are to celebrate is his death, not his birth.

Now, that doesn't mean in any way that we take away from the wonder of his birth and the celebration of his birth.

Because we couldn't, of course, celebrate his death without a birth having taken place. The two things obviously go hand in hand. And so you have great debate about when was Christ actually born.

And one of the details that's always brought out here is this verse, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

[10 : 20] The argument goes that the shepherds would not be out in the fields in December, in wintertime.

In wintertime, the flocks would have been taken down from the hills and fields and normally kept in and round about the villages, much as we tend to do here with our own sheep.

Sheep go out on the moor in summertime, not in wintertime. But there's another clue that helps us to come close, at least, to the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, to dating it, and it's found in chapter 1.

If you turn back with me for a second or two to Luke chapter 1, we'll see something here. In verse 5, the story of the birth of John the Baptist, we have, in the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah.

And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth, and so on. Now, I'm sure, again, you're familiar with the story of Zechariah, how the angel appeared to him, and then the angel appearing to Mary.

[11 : 50] And we find in that account as well, when Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, that the angel has told her that Elizabeth is already with child, and that she will be with child.

And there's a difference of six months between the birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus. They were, of course, cousins.

What exactly that cousin meant, whether they were as we would consider cousins nowadays, or just relatives, is still debatable with the use of the word.

But the clue lies in the word of the division of Abijah in verse 5. Zechariah, serving in the temple as a priest. When were the divisions of service in the temple made?

Well, if you go back to the book of Chronicles, you will find that these divisions were appointed by David. And if you find, for example, if you may have one of these things in your Bible in the middle that has references to the verses where these were, it's in 1 Chronicles, and I'm not going to leave you without telling you the chapter and verse.

[13 : 12] 1 Chronicles 24 and verse 10. You would find the division of Abijah mentioned. And if we knew when Abijah, when that division of Abijah, there were 12 divisions to serve in the temple, one for each month.

If we knew when Zechariah was serving in the temple, and therefore we know that the birth of Jesus is going to take place nine months after the angel speaks to Zechariah, then we would be able to work out when Christ was born.

Not the day, but certainly the month, because the priest served for a month at a time. Now, there are those who have worked this out or tried to work it out.

And the general consensus among the Jews, the Jewish historians, is that this means that the birth of Jesus took place round about October.

I'm not going to go into all the detail of that for you because it would take ages and that's not my main focus. That Jesus was born sometime in October.

[14 : 28] And this would tie in also with the shepherds being out on the fields keeping their watch by night. So how was it then that Christmas became to be celebrated on the 25th of December?

And the answer to that is quite easily found in history. We will find that Pope Julius I declared the 25th of Jesus' birthday in 350 AD in the Catholic Church.

Now, remember that the word Catholic then simply meant the universal Christian church. The Orthodox churches later on disagreed with that.

They regard Jesus' birth that's taking place on the 7th of January. And that's when the Orthodox, the Eastern Orthodox Church and so on, the Greek Orthodox Church, that's when they celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But a little before that, Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome. And it's interesting to compare him with Caesar Augustus.

[15 : 47] Again, time doesn't permit me to go into that fully. But remember, of course, that under the Roman religions, the Caesars were regarded as gods once they had died.

First one being Julius Caesar, who was deified on his death, and then Caesar Augustus in the same way later on. And again, you can research that in more detail if you're interested in that.

But Constantine had decreed in 336 AD, that's before the Pope actually makes the declaration, that the Feast of Saturnalia, which normally took place from the 21st onwards of December, that was in honor of the god Saturn, and was a great time of debauchery and feasting, etc., in the Roman Empire, that that would be replaced by a celebration of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And hence came the name Christ Mass. Now, you're familiar, of course, with the fact that the Mass is the main Catholic worship.

The main worship of the Catholic Church. And therefore, the term Christ Mass, or as we know it now, Christmas, simply meant a special service to celebrate the birth of Christ.

[17 : 19] That's the original meaning of the word. And the first time we find it in English is in 1038, in Old English. But it was celebrated, of course, in Latin, as the church worshipped in Latin through the first 10 centuries.

And so, these are the details that we can work out from this. The shepherds in the field keeping their watch by night.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them. Who was this angel? It's an angel, not the angel, of course, as some translations have it, because the angel of the Lord is generally, in the Old Testament, a reference to an appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A theophany. But this is an angel. And he speaks to the shepherds. And there are many commentators, and I think I agree with them here, although we can't be sure, who think that this is Gabriel.

The same angel who had spoken to Zacharias, and the same angel who had spoken also to Mary. He appears to be the messenger.

[18 : 40] He's one of two, the only two named angels in Scripture. Gabriel and the archangel Michael, whom we see in the book of Daniel and later in the letter of Jude and so on.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them. What a terrifying sight that must have been. We don't know if this was an angel who appeared with wings, etc., and all the other paraphernalia that we associate with angels.

We don't see any of that in the angel when Gabriel appears to Zacharias or when he appears to Mary. But it would seem very clear that what really frightens the shepherds is not so much the angel, but the glory of the Lord shining round about them.

and they were filled with great fear. Or as the AV puts it, they were so afraid. If the glory of the Lord were to appear to you and I this evening, I wonder what our reaction would be.

And there is, of course, a sense in which the glory of the Lord has already appeared to each one of us in the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is a sense also in which the glory of the Lord has appeared to those who are converted, who know him as their Lord and Savior.

[20 : 22] But the first reaction of the shepherds is great fear. this is the Shekinah presence. The presence of God in his glory that has only been seen a few times before in the Old Testament.

This is the Shekinah glory that Moses saw on top of Mount Sinai. and you remember when he came down from Mount Sinai that his face shone.

He had to be covered with a veil. The radiance of the glory of God still clung to him. It appears throughout the periods of the tabernacle in the wilderness that the presence of the Shekinah is there in the Holy of Holies.

It appears later on at the dedication of the temple of Solomon. The first temple. The Shekinah glory fills the temple.

The cloud. It had also been present of course all the way through the wilderness when Moses was leading the people. He had been present in the burning bush.

[21 : 42] It's present as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night leading the people throughout the wilderness and the 40 years that they are there. It appears to Isaiah by himself in Isaiah 6 when he is given this vision in the temple of the seraphim singing holy holy holy is the Lord God of hosts.

And you remember his reaction woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips. And here the shepherds have a similar reaction.

They are filled with great fear. We have no idea how many shepherds there were. We're not told.

It's simply plural. We can imagine there would have been a few of them. But you also have to bear in mind that the shepherds were among the lowest class in society in Jewish society.

Their occupation was looked down on. Always had been. Remember even if you go back to the Old Testament that the Egyptians looked down on the Israelites because they were shepherds as well.

[22 : 56] That's why they're sent to the land of Goshen away from the central royal palaces of Thebes and so on. They were filled with great fear.

Why on earth? And I'm choosing my words carefully. Why on earth did the angels and if it was Gabriel bring this message to the least respected probably among the poorest of all the people in Bethlehem or round about Bethlehem at this time.

Surely you would have thought that the announcement of a king being born and that notice that this is the real king. This is not Caesar Augustus.

This is the king of kings and lord of lords. The child who is to be born. You would have thought that that announcement would have been made as the wise men conclude that first of all it would have been made to the religious elite in Jerusalem or at least to those in power.

That's what the wise men do first of all. They go to visit Herod. Where is he who is born king of the Jews? And of course that has its own consequences which again I can't go into at this particular time.

[24 : 34] time. But it's the news that the angels give them. They're terrified and rightly so and so and so would you and I be if the glory of God appeared to us at this particular time shining round about us.

It's quite amazing to think of that in detail. The angel says to them fear not. Fear not.

When you're in a state of terror and sore afraid as they were what comforting words. Fear not. Somebody once counted that there are 364 fear nots in the scripture.

One for every day of the year. Personally I don't know if that's correct. I googled it once and it did say that that was correct but whatever it doesn't really matter.

The word of God tells us again and again fear not. And this is the message of the angel of Gabriel if it is Gabriel. Why?

[25 : 47] I bring you great good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Good news.

the gospel. That's what gospel means. Good news of great joy for everyone. It's not restricted to the Jews right from the very beginning.

It is for all the people. Why? The for here and at the beginning of verse 11 means because unto you is born this day in the city of David Bethlehem a saviour who is Christ the Lord.

And you notice that the name Jesus is not actually used there. It is Christ the Lord. Why Christ? This is the first use that we see of the term here.

What did Christ mean? The term Christ. what did it mean to the shepherds? Well it meant Messiah. This would probably have been spoken in Aramaic but the Hebrew term the Jews the shepherds would have been familiar with it from the Old Testament scripture.

[27 : 12] This was the news of the coming Messiah. The one who had been anointed from all eternity to be raised up to deliver his people.

And the first mention that we see of that is going right back to Genesis 3. Of the seed of the woman will come to bruise the head of the serpent.

And you notice I know I've said this before but it's worth repeating again. it's not the woman who bears the seed. It's the woman who bears the egg and the man who gives the seed under our natural laws of conception.

But scripture is so clear of the seed of the woman will come he who bruises the head of the serpent. And of course in the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ and again time is going by if you go into everything of Mary's conception through the work of the Holy Spirit you see how that is fulfilled.

Unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour who is Christ and not just Christ but Christ the Lord.

[28 : 36] The full title Messiah the one who is anointed to come and who is God the Lord. I wonder how much the shepherds understood of that.

Probably very little. I wonder how much people understand of it nowadays even although at this time of year everybody knows well everybody in this country at least mainly knows certainly about Christmas time.

You can't miss it if you turn your TV on even in the news it's full of Christmas rubbish all the time never mind the commercialisation that goes with it.

Christ the Lord. How much attention is paid in the superficial worship that goes on in so many places to the term Christ the Lord.

How much attention do you and I pay to the term Christ the Lord? A saviour who is Christ the Lord.

[29 : 49] A saviour from what? A saviour from your sin. That is of course the reason why Christ came.

why the Lord Jesus went to the cross. That is the reason for his death, his resurrection and after that being ascended up to the right hand of the Father where he intercedes for each and every one of his people.

And the angel then tells him that this will be the sign. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. It's interesting the translators of the word of the 1611 version where the word manger first appeared didn't follow the original translation into English that had been done by Tyndale.

What exactly was a manger? A manger was basically a feeding trough for animals and usually at that particular time made out of stone.

Now to fully understand this we have to know the conception of the Jewish house in which they were staying at this time. There are many things connected with this.

[31 : 23] There was no place for them at the inn. The word that's used for inn there is translated in other parts as the upper room. The upper room where the last supper takes place.

Why on earth it's translated as inn here is simply known only to those who did the translation. I'm not saying it's an incorrect translation but it's certainly a translation that changes our vision of things.

The Jewish house at this particular time consisted basically of two stories. The upstairs room the upper room which was normally for guests and the downstairs room where the family slept in the evening and where very often perhaps much like our own black houses at one time the animals were brought in at one end of it as well.

And from that of course comes the typical idea that we have so much and you find in so many hymns and Christmas carols of the stable.

There's no mention of stable in scripture. This will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in a swaddling cloth and lying in a manger.

[32 : 47] The Tyndale translation has it as she laid him in a crutch C-R-A-T-C-H-E. What did that mean?

It meant a basket. It may well have been a basket in which feed stuff was placed for the animals. Why they changed the translation to manger, again, we have no knowledge of that.

Again, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's a mistake, but it sheds a whole different light on the picture that we have of the nativity scene. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths.

And again, this was a sign of poverty. These were strips of cloth, strips of linen usually, that were sort of wrapped round the baby in a sense that they couldn't afford, I suppose, what we would call it nowadays as baby clothes in that way.

It's also a sign of how perhaps unprepared they were for the birth. But again, there's a whole lot of debate about that, and time is passing.

[34 : 03] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

What is known as the gloria dei excelsis? Glory to God in the highest. You find it especially in the hymn, Hark the Herald Angels Sing. A multitude of the heavenly host.

How many were there? We don't know how many a multitude means, but there must have been quite a few of them.

But it's amazing, isn't it, that nobody else except the shepherds saw this multitude of angels. It's almost as if, if you can think of it, if the birth were taking place here, that somewhere out there on the moor, the shepherds are keeping watch over their flocks at night, and the heavenly angels are singing to them, somewhere between here and Ben Barabbas and Ben Braga.

And yet, nobody else saw them. Glory to God in the highest. The glory of the Lord has shone around them, and the angels sung as part of that glory, praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

[35 : 36] Now, that is quite a bad translation as well, with whom he is pleased. Other manuscripts have, and you're probably more familiar with it from the AV, goodwill among men.

There is a sense of which, if we were to take the terminology here and question, with whom is God pleased?

Is God pleased with you this evening? Is he pleased with me? Each one of us would meditate on our own answer to that.

And of course, as we have the full New Testament revealed to us, we know that God can be pleased with none of us unless we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because it is only through the righteousness of Christ, that we are acceptable to God. We cannot come in our own holiness. We don't have any.

[36 : 45] But we can come in the holiness that is imputed to us, as we heard this morning, through the blood of Christ. And just a couple of points, final points on this, the time has gone by.

When the angels went away into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, let us go over and to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

Notice the faith of the shepherds. They believe that what they have been told is true. See this thing that has happened.

So, not only do they believe it, but they want to go and actually witness it. And they believe that the Lord has made known this to us specially.

And therefore they go. Faith followed by obedience. They go with haste and they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a crotch or a manger.

[37 : 55] And when they saw it, what did they do? they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. They didn't keep it to themselves.

Who did they make it known to? Well, obviously, first of all, they made it known to Mary and Joseph that Mary must have been Luke's source, the one who told him about this that he records here because verse 19 says, but Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them. We never hear of the shepherds again. We never hear this story again.

It seems that everyone who heard it, as well as those who witnessed it, forgot about it. Maybe that's unfair to say.

Maybe they always remembered of it. I mean, after all, an appearance of the angels, the song of the angels, the glory of God, how could one ever forget that?

[39 : 18] But we don't have any further reference anywhere to the witness of the shepherds. But it would seem clear that Luke, in researching for his gospel, that his source was this, was Mary.

Again, if you study very carefully when Luke wrote his gospel, it would seem that he wrote it while Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea Philippi for two years, after appearing before Festus and Felix and so on.

You find that in the book of Acts. And Luke was with him then. And it seems almost certainly then that Luke travelled and interviewed all the various witnesses for his account of the gospel.

What does it all mean for us? are we like the shepherds? Do we have faith in the word of God, in what we read?

Do we do what the shepherds did? Do we go and tell everyone about it? And then when they did that, they returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

[40 : 47] Is that what you continue to do even long after Christmas? Do you still glorify and praise God for the revelation and the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Or does it simply wash over you? Remember Mordor was used to say there's a reason for the season. Christ is the reason for the season. but once the season has passed, it's amazing how quickly people forget about the birth of Christ and pay no attention to it until the next season comes and whatever reasons they have to celebrate it.

So as we look forward to celebrating with friends and family on Thursday this week, let us remember the shepherds who were given a vision, perhaps unlike any others, but nevertheless who made it their business to check out whether these details were true and secondly to spread the word about the Lord, the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Whether they were fully aware of what that meant, the coming of Messiah, they probably would have been quite familiar as all Jews were with the Old Testament scriptures, but whether they were fully aware of the prophecies that his death would be what mattered, not his birth, that the spreading of the gospel is what really matters at this time of year.

And it's incumbent on you and I to do the same as the shepherds, to have faith and to obey and then to spread the word of God.

[42 : 53] May the Lord bless these thoughts to us this evening. Let us pray. pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for being able to meditate on these things.

We thank you, O Lord, that you open our minds to understand more and more the message of the gospel and to understand that without the birth there would be no death, but to understand that the Savior came in order that he might die so that each one of us would be able to look to the cross and the blood that was shed for cleansing from sin.

Bless your word at this time of year when so many people hear it and pay little attention to it and celebrate what they don't understand and perhaps don't even know very much about.

And we pray that the message of the Christ Mass, of the birth of Christ, would be of great significance. Bless your word to us this evening. Go with us now as we conclude our worship and pardon our sins through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Let us conclude then by singing in Psalm 24 on page 230.

[44 : 14] Psalm 24 verse 7 these wonderful words.

Ye gates lift up your heads on high ye doors at last foray be lifted up so that the king of glory enter me. But who of glory is the king?

The mighty Lord is this. Even that same Lord that great in might and strong in battle is. Ye gates lift up your heads ye doors that do last foray be lifted up that so the king of glory enter me.

But who is he that is the king of glory? Who is this? Lord of hosts and none but he the king of glory is. Let's sing these mercies and to God's praise.

Ye gates lift up your heads on high. Ye gates lift up your heads on high.

[45 : 22] Ye doors that last foray be lifted up and so the king of glory enter me.

The dear of glory is the king the mighty Lord is this.

He that's in worth that great in might and strong in ways he can't lift up your heads three doors that do last foray be lifted!

And so the king of glory enter me but who is he that is the king the king of glory who is this!

of us and the king of glory is the Lord of us and!

[47 : 23] the king of glory glory is Alleluia!

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Alleluia! Alleluia! grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever Amen