



Luke 2:5–7

5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Reflection

Today's passage follows hard on the heels of yesterday's, so I'm going to read them both together to begin. Luke 2:1–7,

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register. 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there,

the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Joseph and Mary, a village carpenter and a pregnant teenager, have travelled over 100 kilometres, most likely on foot to Joseph's ancestral home, to register for Caesar Augustus' poll tax – a tax deeply resented by the populace and seen as a badge of slavery. It has been an arduous and difficult journey. Imagine walking, or perhaps riding a donkey, for more than 100 kilometres, when you are pregnant and near full term. And this isn't even to speak of the raised eyebrows and closed doors that would have greeted an unmarried

and pregnant couple travelling together in their culture. All so that you can pay taxes to Caesar Augustus, who's recently taken on the blasphemous title, *Dominus et Deus*, 'Lord and God.'

Picking up their story, in today's passage, from verse 5, Joseph,

went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

With these very brief words Luke announces the most significant birth in the history of humanity. And right away our minds run to children's stories of a Mary and Joseph's late-night arrival in Bethlehem, a bustling inn packed to the rafters, and a heartless inn keeper who consigns a woman in the late stages of pregnancy to the stables to give birth.

But as romantic as these stories are, it is in fact very unlikely that the birth of Jesus came about this way. If we look closely at the text we see, verse 6, that ...

6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,

... meaning that Mary and Joseph were likely in Bethlehem for some time before

Jesus was born. It's unlikely they would have left the 100 kilometre plus journey to the last minute and risked giving birth along the way. And then in verse 7 the NIV correctly translates the Greek as,

and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

You'll note that unlike the King James Version which was the source of many of our traditions around the birth of Jesus, the NIV says,

'there was no guest room available for them.'

And not, ‘there was no room at the inn.’ Later on in Luke’s gospel the Greek word for ‘inn’ is used, but here the word is different, referring instead to the ‘guest room’ of a house. And Luke’s description fits the archaeological record. The footprint of a typical first-century Palestinian dwelling was a rectangle divided into three spaces: a large central room with a stable for animals on one end and a guest room on the other. All three rooms normally had separate entrances. The guest room was separated from the central room by a solid wall, the stables by a half-wall allowing the family to feed the animals without going outdoors.¹

Scholars have also pointed out that given what we know of first-century Mediterra-

¹ James R Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2015, 72–73.

nean hospitality on arriving in Bethlehem, Joseph could have simply announced ‘I am Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat, the son of Levi’ and most homes in the town would have been open to him.

Mary and Joseph weren’t turned away from an inn and forced to make do in a stable. Far more likely, they were taken in by distant relatives who lived in a modest first-century dwelling that was overcrowded due to the census. Other guests took precedence over Mary and Joseph who either slept with the family in the central room or in the adjacent stables, the animals most likely having been moved to a pen outside.

But the point remains. The God of the universe steps down to become one of us and

is born in a stable. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords rests his head not in a palace like Caesar Augustus but in the feeding trough of an animal. The hands who flung stars into space can barely grip his mother's finger. The eyes who witnessed the birth of the cosmos blink newly against the light. The Word of God become flesh is unable to speak a word. The one who just moments before sat at the right hand of God in heaven is plunged into a huddle of animals, his head resting where cattle have fed.

Think

It is hard to process the enormity of what has just occurred. The one from whom and through whom and to whom are all things becomes a helpless babe. It all belongs

to him, the world and everything in it, and yet he chooses to lay his newborn head in the feeding trough of cattle, sheep and goats, born amongst the commonest of people in the most humble surrounds.

Amongst the highest aspirations of so many of us in Australia is to own our own homes. Then the renovations begin, kitchens and bathrooms, knock-down-and-rebuilds. Jesus was born poor and he died poor as a reminder to us that God looks at hearts not incomes. It is certainly no disgrace to be poor; and the Bible warns us time and time again that wealth ruins more souls than poverty. All through his life Jesus was poor for our sake, from the hour of his birth to the hour of his death. And through his poverty we are made rich. The great danger of the wealth of our society is

exactly what we see in our passage today. The king doesn't come to the proud and powerful like Caesar Augustus, to those who place themselves at the centre of the universe like Augustus did. The king doesn't come to the proud and powerful, but to the poor and powerless, those who are 'poor in spirit' and very often of modest material means.

Pray

Pray over the condescension, humility and poverty of Jesus today – the one who became poor so that we might become rich. Pray that God would help align his desires for your life with your desires for your life. Ask him to help you to set your mind and heart on Jesus' example and resist the pull of our culture towards ma-

terial things. If God has blessed you with wealth pray that he would show you how he would have it used. If you are poor pray that God would show you how to be rich towards God. And if you are somewhere in the between pray against greed. Pray against wanting more and more of what you have enough of already . Pray instead that you would delight in God and all the blessings he has given us; blessings that are so easily overlooked in our culture's endless and empty quest for more.