

SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

**Six down-to-earth reflections on St. Luke's Christmas Story,
including a new translation of Chapters 1 and 2.**

Introduction

The 'Spirit of Christmas' is something we all value and enjoy – although we would have different ideas of what it is, and probably find it difficult to describe.

Certain words: 'fun', 'parties', 'giving', 'presents', 'families', 'peace', and so on, begin to build-up a picture of the 'Spirit of Christmas'.

It is a busy time, and one of the purposes of this writing is to help us experience 'the Spirit of Christmas' in a deeper and more lasting way – in spite of the rush!

The main part is divided into six short sections, so that you don't have to read it all in one go, but might be able to spend a few minutes each day during the Christmas period.

When a person saw a placard with the words PUT CHRIST BACK INTO CHRISTMAS he complained that they 'try to get religion into everything nowadays!'

But to put Christ back into Christmas is not to bring a negative cloud of 'religion' over the season but to give the real basis for its fun and happiness.

Have you had your first mince pie? Did you make a wish?

Originally, these pies were oval – the shape of the cradle in which the Christ-child lay. When people first ate them, they ate them in silence and remembered that at this time God became a tiny baby for us. Putting Christ back into Christmas enriches what we do; it does not spoil it.

Most of what follows is based on the Gospel stories which tell us of the first Christmas and the events leading up to it. Each of the six sections begins with a Bible passage, so you could take each of my sections one half at a time if you wished.

The translation is my own. [See Appendix A if you're interested in my comments about Christmas readings in public, etc.].

Of the four Gospels –

St. Mark only takes up the story of Jesus later in life.

St. John tells us no Christmas stories but gives us the meaning of Christmas ...[God's] Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Only St. Matthew and St. Luke tell us any Christmas stories.

Matthew has two chapters on Christmas, and they include a number of familiar stories:

- **God's messenger telling Joseph that Mary's child is of the Holy Spirit and to go ahead and marry her.**
- **The baby is given the name 'Jesus' because he 'shall save' his people from their sins.**
- **The Three Kings (sometimes called the Wise Men) worship Jesus.**
- **King Herod's attempted assassination of Jesus.**
- **The escape to Egypt of Joseph, the child and his mother.**

I shall be using St. Luke's two chapters in which he records six different incidents, and we'll look at each one in turn. Some may not be that familiar to you, so bear in mind –

a) That Luke regarded each event as closely related to the Birth of Jesus and to our understanding of it.

b) That the source of these stories may well have been Mary herself. (Who else would have told Luke that Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart ?)

c) It helps to remember that St. Luke, St. Paul's companion, wrote two volumes.

The first recorded Jesus' life; his work, teaching, death and resurrection.

The second book recounted Jesus' continuing work – through his Holy Spirit – in the lives and mission of his followers – the early Christians.

Taking his two books together (and Luke is careful to stress that) [Acts 1:1-11 deliberately reminds readers of what had been in Luke 24.] Luke's story goes not from Bethlehem to Christ's death and resurrection in Jerusalem, but from Bethlehem to the witness of his followers in Rome!

When we take Luke's two volumes together as he intended [Some translations print them that way – e.g. William Barclay; The Bible in Order; F.Fenton; H.J.Schonfield.] then the

Outpouring of the Holy Spirit ('Pentecost') comes right in the middle of the story, not the beginning. Pentecost is often regarded as the 'Birthday' of the Church because it comes at the beginning of Luke's Volume Two. But, as we shall see, the 'Birthday' of the Church and the special coming of the Holy Spirit is really at Christmas – with Pentecost being the Church's 'Coming of Age' party.

These six short stories are much more than an introduction to the Life of Christ, they introduce for us – and wonderfully show – the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community.

1. God’s Promise of New Life

THE ANGEL TELLS THE ELDERLY ZECHARIAH THAT HE AND ELIZABETH WILL HAVE A SON ST. LUKE’S GOSPEL 1:5-25

During Herod’s reign in Judea there was a priest called Zechariah; he and his wife, Elizabeth, were both descendants of Aaron, and Zechariah belonged to the ‘Abijah’ group of priests.

They were a good and devout couple who lived according to all God’s laws. They were very old and Elizabeth had never been able to have a child.

One day, when his priestly group were on Temple-duty, Zechariah was the one picked to go and burn incense by the altar. The large congregation remained outside praying during this incense-burning.

One of God’s messengers terrified Zechariah by appearing visibly to the right of the altar. He was awestruck! ‘Don’t be afraid, Zechariah’ said the angel, ‘God will answer your prayers and you and Elizabeth will have a son, whom you must name – JOHN. He will not only be a joy and delight to you both but to countless others. He will be a great man of God. He is not to touch alcohol and right from his conception he will be filled with the Holy Spirit of God.

‘He will lead many of your nation back to God. With the same Spirit that empowered Elijah he will pave the way for the Messiah by preparing the people and turning them from division and disobedience to love and right-living.’

‘How can I possibly be sure of all this?’ exclaimed Zechariah, ‘... neither my wife nor I are young any more!’

‘I am Gabriel’, said the angel, ‘I am the one who stands in the presence of God himself and have been personally sent from him to tell you your good news! As you doubt my message, you will be struck dumb until all this takes place – as it certainly will do in due course.’

When the week’s duties were over, Zechariah returned home and sure enough, Elizabeth became pregnant. But she kept very much to herself for the next five months, saying ‘God has demonstrated his love to me, and at last my long disgrace at being childless is all over.’

Aaron had been the brother of Moses and every direct descendant was a priest, which meant that there were about twenty-thousand of them! To help organise them they were divided up into twenty-four groups, the ‘Abijah’ group to which Zechariah belonged being the eighth. Each group was responsible for a week’s worship in the central Temple of Jerusalem, but with over eight-hundred in each group the majority of priests never had their names drawn at all – and if their name was drawn it was the highlight of their life!

Unlike today in the Christian tradition there was in the Temple a great division between the priest and the people. The priest was literally inside, in the Priest’s Court, while the people were outside in the Court of the Israelites.

Every morning and evening a lamb was slain as a sacrifice and prayers said for the nation.

At the end of the service the people waited for the priest to come and bless them, much as crowds will wait for the Pope’s blessing today. You can imagine their consternation when Zechariah did not appear!

The words of this blessing went back to the time of Aaron, and are used in synagogue and church today –

***The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace***

[Numbers 6:26-27]

This makes a good prayer to use at Christmas, and when facing the uncertainty of another year.

In the first century, not to have a child was not merely a personal loss, but a social and religious stigma as well. A womb that was barren was viewed in terms of ‘death’. God, the Jews taught, would excommunicate the unfruitful. Divorce could be granted for failure to bear children.

St. Luke’s later story is so extraordinary and unbelievable that he tells us about Zechariah and Elizabeth to prepare us to learn that God is a God of surprises!

What greater surprise in history, than God himself stepping right into history. But more of that later!

2. God's Message to Mary

The first part of Luke's account introduced two themes very central to Christmas..

1. The PAIN that Elizabeth and Zechariah felt over not having a child relates to that deep desire so many of us have at Christmastime to restore and complete our family life. More than any other time we are pained by our differences and divisions: whether in home, or church, in the nation or on the world-scene. We hunger for completeness and harmony and the blessings of peace.

2. The second theme is HUMILITY. We are especially conscious of the aged, the weak, and the have-nots at Christmas. Indeed, 'Boxing' Day gets its name from the boxes into which our gifts were placed for the poor.

In Luke's story Zechariah is no special religious leader, simply a country priest who, with his wife, live in some unmentioned place among the hills of Judea. Of little standing in the religious or secular life of his nation, Zechariah is selected by God, to father a child - and that against all human odds! - who will be uniquely called to prepare for the coming of the Messiah himself. Luke cleverly draws our attention to the power-ful and the power-less, to the highest and the lowest by deliberately placing two personal names in one sentence :

During HEROD's reign in Judea there was a priest called ZECHARIAH.

These two men were, in worldly terms, the Sublime and the Ridiculous; for it was this Herod who was dubbed 'The Great'. It is good to question what we mean by greatness, success and worth. God's priorities are very different from ours - as we will read later in Mary's Song. It is the humble, the devout and the insignificant whom God tends to choose and use.

The calling, characteristics and mission of John (later nicknamed 'The Baptist') belongs to a long line of Old Testament ministries: Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. These had, in the main, only experienced the Holy Spirit falling on them on *specific occasions*. But with Elizabeth's child there is an amazing difference, ... ***right from his conception he will be filled with the Holy Spirit of God!*** Luke does not use this phrase of any of the Apostles or disciples before describing Pentecost in his second volume.

It is quite remarkable that there are more mentions of the Holy Spirit in Luke's two chapters of Christmas stories than in the entire Gospel of Matthew and the entire Gospel of Mark!

If we were to come to these stories for the first time we might think that Mary and those around her experience their own Pentecost – their own special outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. We'd be right! They do!

We have in these stories a foretaste of the Spirit-filled community of Luke's second volume, the *Acts of the Apostles*.

St. Luke in the Acts summarised St. Peter’s talk on the Day of Pentecost when he quoted the prophet Joel –

*In these last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
Your young men will see visions,
Your old men will dream dreams,
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days
and they will prophesy* [see Acts 2:17-18, quoting Joel 2:29-29ff.]

These six stories comprise three visions (the first we have already read) and three prophecies.
The Vision of Zechariah
The Vision of Mary
The Prophecy of Mary
The Prophecy of Zechariah
The Vision of the Shepherds
The Prophecy of Simeon

The *last days* of which the Old Testament prophet Joel wrote have, in Luke’s thinking, already arrived. The Spirit of God is being poured-out, beginning with a little group of humble and devout Jews who had chosen to pray for, prepare for and watch for the Coming of their Messiah.

The next reading will probably be more familiar to you. In it, Jesus’ birth is foretold. As you read again the familiar story note the very human and authentic reactions of Mary; her fear, her doubt - not at all items you would include if you were making-up a pious legend!

GOD'S MESSAGE TO MARY ST. LUKE’S GOSPEL 1:26-40

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent his messenger again, this time to Nazareth (a town up north in Galilee) to a young woman who was engaged to a descendant of King David, named Joseph. Her name was Mary.

Gabriel greeted Mary in her own room. ‘Mary, you are most highly honoured, for God himself is with you!’ Mary found such a greeting disturbing, and wondered what it all really meant. But the angel understood and said, ‘There is nothing at all to be afraid of; you really are chosen by God! You will become pregnant and have a boy, and you are to name him – JESUS.

‘He will become a very great man and will have the title ‘Son of the Most High God’. God himself will give him a throne as his ancestor David had, but Jesus will reign for ever, and have a kingdom which will be eternal!’

‘But how can this possibly happen,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘as I am not yet married?’

‘It will take place because God’s Holy Spirit – his power – will come upon you and be yours. As a result of this therefore, the child to be born will be a ‘holy’ child; and will be called ‘The Son of God’.

‘Elizabeth, your cousin, is going to have a child and is already six months pregnant – for with God nothing is impossible!’

‘I trust the Lord God utterly, and wish only to serve him’ Mary responded, ‘I want everything to happen just as you have promised.’

The angel left her and Mary went off immediately to the Judean hills to see Zechariah and Elizabeth.

When this story is read in public it is customary to end it a verse earlier than the passage above. This is a pity as it gives the impression that this is an isolated story that happened out-of-the-blue. But it was an event meticulously planned by God. The baby John could have been born to anyone of God’s choosing. But it was to Mary's *cousin*. This ensured that the young Mary had that personal support and encouragement so necessary for what lay ahead. Elizabeth was God's provision for Mary, so, as Luke records Mary *went off immediately* to see her.

Just as Herod the Great was passed-by in favour of an unknown country priest, so Jerusalem is by-passed as God chose Nazareth of all places! We know it today, of course, but that is only because of these events by which it was to become the home-town of Jesus Christ. Nazareth was not important enough even to warrant mention in the Old Testament [or in the Apocrypha, the Talmud or in the writings of the Jewish historian – Josephus.] One of the driest comments of the Apostles that has been recorded for us was Nathaniel’s *‘Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?’* [John 1:46]

To this scorned village in enemy-occupied territory God’s angel comes to a girl legally pledged to be married to a young carpenter!

Whole books could be written on this great encounter. As well as being the turning point of history, it is one of the most profound events, of great spiritual and psychological depth. Because of this, its meaning and significance overflow the actual occasion and touch the very heart of the spiritual life of you and me, and of the church in every age.

The angel greets Mary with a declaration that God loves her. How typical of us all, and true to life, that Mary is not immediately glad, but troubled by the implications of it! She says nothing.

The angel then reassures Mary and removes the fears that she was keeping quiet about.

After that great personal reassurance, the angel breaks the news to her that she is to have a son, Jesus, who will be ‘*Son of God Most High*’.

Mary, like Christians today, is called to be the bearer of divine life, and being unmarried she knows that she has nothing within herself capable of producing new life.

The church in every age is faced with the same problem! It has an impossible task for which humanly it has only little resources.

Mary asks how this can come about, and thereby asks the most vital question that ever faces the church. How can I, how can we, be the bearers of divine *life*?

She is given what is basically a very simple answer. **Only Divine Life can create divine life.** God’s Spirit is well able to do the impossible, provided we are open enough to let him.

God always supplies ‘others’ for our help and encouragement – whether they are the Saints of Scripture, of history, or of today. So God points her to the human who would support her most – to Elizabeth.

Mary says ‘YES’ – the first ‘yes’ to Jesus Christ, and a ‘yes’ which has a special place in God’s encouragement to all those who have later made their ‘yes’ to Christ.

3. Cousins Together

If you had had a letter through the door this morning on Buckingham Palace notepaper saying that Her Majesty the Queen was going to call on you this evening, you would probably not have spent much time wondering who delivered it! It would not matter whether it was the paper boy or the Lord Mayor, providing it was a genuine royal message. The message would eclipse the messenger. So it is in Scripture.

‘Angels’ in the Bible are simply God’s ‘messengers’. John the Baptist was later described as a ‘messenger’ and the same Greek word is used. What is important to the writers is that they are the King’s messengers, not whether they are human or supernatural, extraordinary or ordinary. That is why, in my translation I have used *God’s messenger* and *angel* interchangeably.

While there is a right place for philosophical and metaphysical questioning, it would be silly to allow questions about the nature of the messengers to obscure the nature of the *message*.

The important truth which they ‘embody’ (an interesting word in this connection!) is that the Creator-God, Lord of all universes, wishes personally to communicate to the little men and women of his own creation. Remarkable! It may be difficult to believe, but if you cannot believe it, then you’ve nothing to celebrate at Christmastime.

God is a God who SPEAKS. That says a remarkable thing about God, and an even more remarkable thing about you and me. We MATTER to him!

There is a little phrase in Scripture which occurs countless times and which never ceases to amaze me –

GOD SAID

One of the readings often used on Christmas Day is this –

In many and various ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,
but in these last days he has spoken to us – by a son. [Hebrews 1:1-2]

God speaks to us through a human life, the life of Jesus Christ, because a human life is about the only thing that all men and women and boys and girls can really understand, regardless of race or position or age.

In the next Scripture passage we have the first of three great Songs of Praise, which since the 6th century have been used regularly when Christians worship.

COUSINS TOGETHER ST. LUKE’S GOSPEL 1:39-57

Mary arrived at Zechariah’s, went in and greeted Elizabeth. On hearing Mary, the baby within her seemed to leap for joy, and Elizabeth too was filled with the Holy Spirit.

In a voice for all to hear Elizabeth exclaimed – ‘Of all women you must be the happiest! and God’s blessing is on your child. Who am I to be honoured by your visit – the Mother of my Lord here with me? The moment I heard you arrive, my baby kicked joyfully! How happy you must be knowing that the Lord will keep his promise to you.’

Mary burst into song –

*‘I do indeed praise the Lord,
and every part of me rejoices in my Saviour-God.
My low status was no barrier to him.
The Mighty God has done something so wonderful for me,
that all future generations will call me ‘blessed’.
His name is ‘Holy’,
and his love and kindness go out to all who wish to honour him
– of every generation.
Those who dishonour him know his strength;
the proud he scatters in chaos;
the powerful he topples from their thrones
Those who are humble, he raises,
those who are starving, he feeds;
(although those with too much he sends away with nothing!)
God has always helped our nation, Israel,
and true to his promise made to our ancestors,
he has been graciously loving to all the descendants of Abraham.’*

Mary remained with Elizabeth for the next three months [The visit after six months and extended to three months was obviously to enable Mary to be present at the birth of Elizabeth's baby, John.] *and then went back home.*

God’s messenger had said that Mary’s child would be the result of a coming – an ‘*overshadowing*’ - of the Holy Spirit. St. Luke uses the same sort of language of the Cloud of God’s Presence which overshadowed Jesus at his Transfiguration, a concept which has deep roots in Old Testament thought – the Cloud of God’s Glory in the midst of his people.

Note the references to the Holy Spirit -

Mary comes to her cousin with the Holy Spirit upon her.

Elizabeth is *filled with the Holy Spirit* on the occasion of Mary's arrival.

Elizabeth's unborn baby, had already (according to the remarkable prophecy to Zechariah) [Luke 1:15] been ‘*filled with the Spirit*’ since conception!

Quite a Pentecost!

Just as at Pentecost itself the disciples were accused of being drunk, so here there is a burst of wonder, joy, prophecy, dance and praise.

In the translation above I had ‘... *in a voice for all to hear, Elizabeth exclaimed...*’ the Greek is literally – ‘*she called-out with a great cry!*’ I wonder what her neighbours thought of *that*, especially as she had kept herself virtually hidden for the first five months!

It is a British heresy (and a psychological and biological absurdity) to assume that joy should always be suppressed!

The parallel between Luke’s beginning of the *Acts of the Apostles* with Pentecost and his beginning his *Gospel* with these stories cannot be missed. It is from this Pentecost-preview that two great prophetic songs of praise burst forth – the ‘*Hail Mary*’ and the ‘*Magnificat*’.

The song of the Spirit-filled Elizabeth forms the basis for the *Hail Mary* (The form in which it is usually used today has a *Holy Mary...* petition added to it.)

Elizabeth asks why she should be honoured by Mary’s visit. Mary responds in the Spirit by taking-up the theme of Elizabeth but she addresses God not Elizabeth. Mary does not take up her cousin's theme and rejoice in the fact that she has favoured Elizabeth with her presence. Neither does Mary thank Elizabeth for being a comforting sign to her of God's wonderful ways. She simply rejoices that both Elizabeth and herself have found favour with God.

Mary’s song is based on the song of Hannah, Samuel’s mother [1 Samuel 2:1-10] -

*My heart exults in the Lord...
The barren has borne seven,*
and she who has many children is forlorn...
The Lord make poor and makes rich:
he brings low, he also exalts...
He raises up the poor, etc.*

*The use of *seven* is probably a general number typifying a sizeable family. Hanna seems only to have had six children, three more boys and two girls (verse 21).

It is a rich compilation stemming from her devotion to God and her deep knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures. It is a hymn of ‘affirmation’ as we might call it today, affirming what she knows of God rather than focusing on her own needs. This is a helpful example for us when we are perplexed or depressed. Many hymns, psalms and spiritual songs which affirm what is true of God can help lift our spirits.

Mary's song rejoices that –

God recognises the humble
God is always merciful
God performs mighty deeds
God casts down the strong
God raises up the weak
God fills the hungry
God loves his nation
God keeps his promises

Mary faced an uncertain and painful future. She didn't panic! She did not allow herself to be led astray by her emotions. In times of stress we can be misled by our *feelings* about God; they are unreliable guides to the truth! Stick to the known facts!

If we feel that God does not care and is removed from us, then at no period is it more easy than at Christmas to affirm what every history book has to state – that in a particular place, at a particular time, among a particular group, into a particular family, and through a particular mother, God stepped right into the history that he himself had created.

Emmanuel – God with us! [Matthew 1:23]

4. Elizabeth’s Boy Is Born As Promised

In this writing so far I generally referred to Mary simply as ‘Mary’ without her traditional title ‘The Blessed Virgin’. It might have struck some readers as very ‘Catholic’ had I done so straightaway, but we have now seen that both *'blessed'* and *'virgin'* are very *Biblical!* In the older translations Elizabeth exclaims *'Blessed are you among women'* [Luke 1:42 (see also 1:45)] and Mary is inspired by the Holy Spirit in her great song, the Magnificat, to believe that *all generations will call me 'blessed'*. [Luke 1:48]

While traditionally the Church has given the title ‘Saint’ to the leading Christians of the New Testament; with Mary, Christians of later times have usually opted for the Biblical title *'Blessed'* instead.

There are a number of different Mary's in the New Testament, and the description **‘Virgin’** distinguishes the Mother of Jesus from Mary the Magdelene, Mary of Bethany, Mary the wife of Cleopas, Mary the Mother of Mark, and so on.

Whatever difficulties the Virgin Birth, or more correctly 'Virgin Conception' may present to some Christians, it is clearly the belief of Luke and Matthew.

[NB: Unless I am discussing questions of authorship, I always use as the author's name that which would seem most natural to the majority of readers.]

The fact that there is silence about the virgin conception in St. John, St. Paul and the rest of the New Testament illustrates the important point that their proclamation of **who Jesus is**, is in no way dependent on the precise nature of his arrival. This is similar to what we noted earlier: God’s message is not dependent on the nature of the messenger.

THE MIRACLE is that **God is with us**, Emmanuel; Christmas celebrates that glorious truth. It celebrates God's arrival – *the Word made flesh*. (Scripture is not preoccupied with the biological question 'how?'.)

December the 24th used to be ‘Adam and Eve Day’, with the Coming of Christ (whom St. Paul regarded as the Second Adam) celebrated the day after.

The Holy Spirit gave life to Creation and was breathed into the Man (Adam). So the coming of the Second Adam ushers in a new order, a re-creation, a New Israel. *‘As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.* [I Corinthians 15:22] So it is hardly surprising that the new epoch begins with the Breath, or Spirit, of God so obviously at work amongst us.

We talk of the ‘Spirit of the Age’, but Luke writes to inform us of a new ‘Age of the Spirit’. All these stories serve as an introduction to it.

The Christian creed affirms that the Holy Spirit is the ‘Lord and Giver of Life’, and every facet of these stories illustrates this. Whatever views are held about the virgin conception/birth, the basic truth is that the baby at Bethlehem brings the Life of God himself amongst us and heralds a new Age of the Spirit.

These six passages contain the four great New Testament Songs of the Messiah. The Songs of Elizabeth and the Mary we have already read and reflected on. Next comes the birth of Elizabeth's child, and the third great prophetic song.

ELIZABETH'S BOY IS BORN AS PROMISED ST. LUKE'S GOSPEL 1:57-80

Elizabeth had a baby boy. Her relations and neighbours shared her delight and thanked God for his love and goodness to her. Eight days later, according to Jewish custom) they were due to circumcise him.

Some were already calling the baby 'Zechariah' after father. Elizabeth, however, said 'No. He is to be called JOHN!' 'You haven't a single relation of that name!' they complained, and nodded to the still-dumb Zechariah to evoke his response.

Zechariah requested to have something to write on. He wrote, 'His name is JOHN'. They were astonished. Instantly Zechariah's voice returned and he praised God.

All the villagers were thunderstruck and these events became the talking point of the entire area. They raised, in the hearts of everyone who heard about them, the question 'What is in store for this child – for already the hand of the Lord seems to be upon him?'

Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied in these words –

*'Praise to the Lord God of Israel,
he has actually visited us to save us.
Among the descendants of King David
he has, as promised in prophecy,
arisen in strength to save us.
He will rescue us from our enemies,
and free us from the clutches of those who hate us.
Thus he continues his love and kindness
which he gave to our ancestors,
and keeps his sacred commitment to us,
according to his contract
with Abraham our 'father'.*

*'He delivers us from fear
at the hands of our enemies,
so that we may serve him
truly and honestly all our lives.*

*'You, my son, will be God's Prophet.
You will go ahead of the Lord himself.
You will get ready a route for him,*

*and inform people of his saving work,
and his forgiveness of sinners.*

*‘God’s heart has gone out to us!
He is visiting us!
The sunrise of his love is here;
he will shine in our lives,
drive away all darkness,
enlighten us in death,
and set us on the road to peace!’*

Their child grew up to become spiritually strong and lived in desert places until he ministered publicly in the land of Israel.

If you have carol singers this year, your thoughts can turn to this incident. In New Testament times when a child was expected the neighbours and musicians gathered around the house, and if a boy was born they would break into music and song.

In the first story we read how God’s messenger came to Zechariah in the Temple to tell him that Elizabeth and he can expect a child – and to call him ‘John’. Zechariah was dumbfounded – literally!

In those days a baby boy was often given his father or grandfather’s name. Some had already assumed that Zechariah was the child’s name. When Zechariah was assumed to be too old to father a child; a name from outside the family, therefore, like ‘John’, will have encouraged gossip of the worst sort! (St. Luke, writing in the second half of the first century had probably encountered the charge that Jesus himself was illegitimate.)

‘John’ means ‘God is gracious’ (just as girls are named ‘Grace’ today). This was true not just of the Zechariah home, but of the whole nation, as Zechariah stressed in his great song (above) nowadays called the *Benedictus*.

Christians, a few hundred years after these events, chose December 25th as the day of celebration. They, like us, did not know the actual birth-date. It was the shortest day of the year. [It was the shortest day until 1582.]

For centuries before Christ, and after him, people feared the disappearance of the sun altogether at this time – and they knew their lives depended on it. They prayed to the sun, and lit fires to encourage its return. They celebrated when the hours of daylight increased again. Our Christmas lights derive from this, as do our log fires.

These things can be meaningless, or a pagan hangover from the past. Far better to let them illustrate the words from the Christmas Gospel –

The true light that lights everyman was coming into the world [John 1:9]

In the older and traditional translation of the Zechariah's Song there were the lines – ***Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us.***

The original word is the same as that used both for ‘rising’ and for ‘east’ in St. Matthew’s account of the Wise Men. It refers basically to the sun-rise. Various modern translations have ‘day dawning’, ‘sunrise’, ‘light of dawn’, ‘new day’, or ‘morning sun’. Hence my translation above: ***The sunrise of his love is here.***

Zechariah continues with the great words (using an old translation) –
To be a light to them that sit in darkness and in the valley of death.

This is a great prayer for Christmas and the New Year. As terrorism changes the conduct of war, and aims to create instability and unease, so there is more urgent need for a light in our darkness, and a light to guide us into the way of peace.

That light is Jesus Christ.

5. The Birth of Jesus

St. Luke writing these Christmas stories during or after St. Paul’s missionary ministry which culminated in *Rome*, begins this section by relating to the known Roman World.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

The actual documents from every census taken in Egypt between the year a.d. 20 and a.d. 270 have been found. It is clear that they were taken for various purposes, taxing and military service, for example (the Jews were exempt the latter).

Some scholars doubted whether Luke was right in stating that folk had to return to their home town for this; their administrative common-sense not being sufficient to convince them! Now the question is settled because a government edict of the period has been found stating –

‘It is necessary to compel all those
who for any cause whatever are residing outside their districts
to return to their homes

So we shall see below how Mary and Joseph are compelled to travel eighty miles south of Nazareth across the top of the mountain chain down past Jerusalem to a small town, Bethlehem – a place now crowded with all its other natives returning home for the Roman census.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS ST. LUKE’S GOSPEL 2:1-20

At this time, the Roman Emperor Augustus ordered a census of the Empire (this was the first census to take place when Quirinius was Governor of Syria). Everyone returned to their native town, and this is why Joseph went from Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to the royal city of Bethlehem, because he was a descendant of King David. He went to register with Mary, to whom he was engaged, and who was shortly expecting a baby.

When they arrived she gave birth to her first child – a son, and because there was no room for them in the inn, they rested in a stable, and wrapped the baby up snugly.

Nearby, shepherds were living out in the fields protecting their sheep during the night. God’s messenger came to them, and the Splendour of God himself enveloped them, and they were very scared. But the angel said ‘Do not be frightened. Look, I have a message of great joy to tell you, a joy for everyone:

‘This very day in the royal city here your Saviour, your Messiah, your Lord has been born! To prove this is true, you will find a baby all wrapped-up and lying in a manger.’

Suddenly a vast army of heavenly beings appeared, praising God and saying – ‘Praise God in heaven above, and on earth his peace comes to those of goodwill!’

The angels then left, and the shepherds said to each other ‘Let’s go into Bethlehem, and see all this that God has announced to us.’ They rushed there, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus lying in a manger.

Once they had seen them, they made public what God had told them of the child, and everyone who heard them was astonished at the shepherds’ story.

(Mary pondered it all, and kept it to herself.)

The shepherds returned, praising God and giving him glory because all they had been told they had seen with their own eyes!

He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all,
And his shelter was a stable,
And his cradle was a stall ...

The place of Christ’s Birth was a place of *rejection* not of welcome.

It was to bring home to people the appalling conditions of the first Christmas that St. Francis arranged to have live scenes with people, and real animals to depict the story, after which he preached about the poverty of Jesus Christ. Thoroughly unhygienic, smelly and unpleasant – no place to have a baby, then or now. Today our cribs derive from the live-crib that St. Francis introduced.

God so respects the mankind he has himself created, that he will never over-ride or over-rule us. This is an important truth when events force us to ask the question 'Why did God allow it?' If we shut the inn door, or any other door, in his face he will wait outside, as the famous text in Revelation reminds us –

Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me. [Revelation 3:20.]

God’s love is sometimes misunderstood as a lack of care. Why doesn’t he batter the door down and put his world to rights? We complain at the mess he has let our place get into, forgetting that he touches only what we allow him to touch. Every action, every decision which excludes him shuts the door yet again on the One who has the power to make things better.

December the 26th is called Boxing Day because on that day the church collection boxes were opened and gifts distributed to the hungry and poor. In the church calendar it is actually **St. Stephen’s Day**.

Why has St. Stephen the great honour to be remembered on the day closest to Christ’s birth? The reason is that he was the first Christian martyr; the first to face death for Christ.

Amid the rejoicing of Christmas is rejection. Our holly reminds us of this. It probably gets its name from ‘Holy’, and in Sweden and Norway is known as the ‘Christ-thorn’ because it reminds us of the crown-of-thorns, and the red berries of Christ’s blood shed for us. Our songs about holly, and our use of it remind us of the rejection that Christ received at birth, and it may alert us to ways in which we still reject him and allow him ‘no room’ in our lives.

In Luke’s first four stories God’s messengers have addressed themselves to individuals. In this story of the Shepherds there is an almost cosmic explosion: the angel is joined by a vast *heavenly* host, and the message is not just blessing to a family, but peace on *earth!*

At that time, the Roman world was enjoying what became known as the 'Roman Peace' (*Pax Romana*). The peace of Christmas is not just political or military stability, but a peace which heals the rift from God caused by man’s turning away from him: the reconciliation between us and God. Charles Wesley, in what is probably the finest Christmas hymn wrote –

*Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.*

Taking up this theme of peace, and using the language of the Benedictus (section 4, above), Wesley continues –

Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.

Rarely in human history is the message of Peace not urgent. At Christmas the great Jewish blessing and prayer for peace is answered. God’s Peace is with us!

The one whom Isaiah described as *Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace* has arrived, to receive all man’s hostility, to suffer and die as a result, bearing our sorrows and sins.

Much later St. Paul was to write: *But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace ... So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.* [Ephesians 2, verses 13-14, 17-18]

The only adequate foundation on which to build the brotherhood of man is the Fatherhood of God, and our access to the Father is through the Son, enabled by the one Spirit of whom we have read so much here.

Peace is not reached after we have all our circumstances in order. To attempt to reach it via that process leads to frustration and disappointment.

Peace can be God’s gift when the circumstances are totally wrong, when you suffer the pain and indignity of being rejected and allotted the cowshed instead. At such times our sentimental Christmas cards are nauseating, but the reality of what some of them are trying to portray is the only thing that makes sense, and the only source of hope.

Mary, we read, ***kept all these things and pondered them in her heart*** – and it will serve us in good stead if we do the same.

The shepherds returned, praising God and giving him glory because all they had been told they had seen with their own eyes!

6. ‘I Have Seen Your Saviour!’

Luke began by introducing us to two good and faithful Jews, Zechariah and Elizabeth. We must remember that the Jewish religion was, and is, capable of producing devout and holy people ‘fit for a King’ (as we say). Such folk formed the cradle of our Christian faith, and nurtured God’s Christ. If the New Testament exposes hypocrisy among the Jewish faith it is equally ruthless in exposing it in the Christian brotherhood!

In our final story we meet two more fine people, but first a word or two of explanation before we read about them.

A child is a gift from God: this was the belief which lay behind the three Jewish ceremonies which form the background to our last story – Redemption, Circumcision, and Purification,

1. The REDEMPTION OF THE FIRSTBORN. Jews had a saying ‘God does not give children, only lend them’. Every Jewish male (human and animal) was regarded as belonging to the Lord and sacred to him. This may strike you as a strange concept, though it is not half as strange as our own nation’s readiness to kill unborn babies in the belief that life is not sacred at all!

The parents paid a nominal amount to one of God’s representatives symbolically to ‘buy back’ or ‘redeem’ their child. It illustrates who the real owner was, and it is a good reminder to Christians – and indeed everyone – that they are God-owned.

2. CIRCUMCISION was not, for the Jews, a social entry into puberty or manhood (as it is among some peoples). It is done in infancy and is a religious act to mark the entry of the boy into God’s covenant-people. Like Christian sacraments, circumcision is an outward and visible sign of a spiritual reality.

3. PURIFICATION after childbirth was the third ceremony. If the mother had a boy she brought a sheep and a pigeon to the Temple for a burnt-offering and a sin-offering respectively. Really poor people, like Mary and Joseph, could make the ‘Offering of the Poor’, just *two pigeons*. [Leviticus 12:8 - *If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf and she shall be clean.*]

‘I HAVE SEEN YOUR SAVIOUR!’ ST. LUKE’S GOSPEL 2:21-39

Mary and Joseph at their baby's circumcision, a week later, gave him the name – JESUS. This is the name which God’s messenger had instructed them to give him, even before he was conceived.

When the time came for the other ceremonies required by the Law of Moses, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple at Jerusalem to dedicate him to God. (Note – the law stated that every first-born male was sacred to God.) They came to make their sacrifices according to custom, which allowed them to bring either a pair of doves or two baby pigeons.

In Jerusalem at that time was a man called Simeon, who was just and devout, and expected to see God’s saving work in the nation. The Holy Spirit of God rested upon him, and it was by the Spirit that he knew that he would not die without first seeing the Messiah of God. Simeon was led by the Holy Spirit to arrive at the Temple just as Mary and Joseph were bringing in the baby Jesus for the ceremonies. He took the child in his arms and praised God saying –

*‘Now my Lord, you can release me from life!
You have kept your word;
I can now die in peace!
For with my own eyes
I have seen your Saviour
whom you are revealing to the world,
as a light for all nations,
and the crowing glory of the Jews.’*

Mary and Joseph were astonished at what he said about their child. After blessing them, Simeon then turned to Mary and said – ‘This child is destined to bring upheaval in our land; many will speak out against what he will stand for because he will expose people’s motives. As for you, yours will be the pain of a broken heart.’

There was an elderly widow, Phanuel’s daughter (of Asher’s tribe) whose name was Anna, and who was a prophetess. Her husband had died after only seven years, and she was now eighty-four. She stayed in the Temple day and night in prayer and fasting. When she saw the Holy Family there, she too gave thanks to God, and spoke about the baby to everyone in Jerusalem who was open to hear news of God’s saving work.

When everything had been done that was required by law, Mary and Joseph went back up to Galilee to their home-town Nazareth.

The whole message of Christmas is summed up in the name given to the baby – JESUS – the name that the angel had commanded be given him.[Luke 1:31] Why? Because it means ‘the one who saves/rescues/delivers.’

JESUS, the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease;
‘Tis music in the sinner’s ears,
‘Tis life, and health, and peace.
He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me ...

The very Name given at birth links the Cradle to the Cross, as we sing on Christmas Day (in the hymn ‘Christians awake salute the happy morn’) –

O may we keep and ponder in our mind
God’s wondrous love in saving lost mankind!
Trace we the Babe, Who hath retrieved our loss,
From His poor manger to his bitter cross;
Tread we His steps, assisted by His grace,
Till man’s first heavenly state again takes place.

Then may we hope, the angelic hosts among,
To sing, redeemed, a glad triumphal song;
He that was born upon this joyful day
Around us all His glory shall display;
Saved by His love, incessant we shall sing
Eternal praise to heaven’s Almighty King.

In this last story two of its major themes are pain and death, but that does not end us on a sad note, for it is death into *life* and the suffering of *redemption*. Simeon faces death in peace, and the pain which Mary will endure as later she will stay by her son on his wooden cross as she stayed by him in his wooden cradle, will not be the pain of losing all, but the pain of new life. For her Good Friday was indeed a ‘Good’ Friday soon to be eclipsed by the victory and glory of the Resurrection.

This article is entitled the Spirit of Christmas. That Spirit is none other than the Holy Spirit of God active to transform our lives with the divine power of God himself. St. Luke begins his first volume by showing us how essential was the Holy Spirit's intervention for those at the Birth of the Saviour. His second volume starts by showing – in the story of Pentecost – how essential is the Holy Spirit's intervention in the lives of those who wish to follow Jesus – now risen and alive.

This is why the traditional Christmas Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer asks God that he might renew us by that same Spirit.

*Almighty God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son
to take our nature upon him,
and as at this time to be born of a pure Virgin;
Grant that we being regenerate,
and made thy children by adoption and grace,
may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit;
through Jesus Christ our Lord...*

APPENDIX A

At Christmastide there are folk in church who are not familiar with the Bible stories.

1. We must not assume that all hearers of Scripture know what the previous unread verses were about! A classic example is the lesson that begins "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel..."

What do folk make of this? June? Few Christians, even, will immediately relate it to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. (We do not respect Scripture if we rip passages out of context and leave essential information behind in the process!)

Each passage here, therefore, is self-contained. None presupposes the names of characters and places from earlier (unread) passages.

2. Names or descriptions often replace pronouns. Thus 'he', 'she' and 'them' might become 'Joseph', 'Mary' and 'the Shepherds'. I have added the title 'King' to David for hearers & readers who would not know who he was.

3. Our familiarity with the passages can make us miss their impact. I have not hesitated to remind readers/hearers of the astonishing facts (my additions underlined here): I am the one who stands in the presence of God himself and have been personally sent by him to tell you. I have used exclamation marks to remind us of the incredible nature of some of the things said, e.g. God himself is with you! With God nothing is impossible!

4. Today's language is quicker and briefer. For example, take this sentence: When Elizabeth's full time had come that she should be delivered, she brought forth a son. We would only mention the timing if the baby were premature or very late. And the first question we ask is not 'Have you a son or daughter?' but 'Is it a boy or a girl'. Today we'd use six words instead of sixteen and simply say: Elizabeth has had a baby boy.

5. Patterns of parenting change. To wrap a baby up tightly would strike many of us today as cruel but in the first century it was what caring mothers thought was best. In order to convey the care of which swaddling clothes were then an expression, I opted for the phrase wrapped him up snugly. (I was delighted when the New Living Bible later borrowed the idea!)