

Come to Bethlehem - Christmas - Reflection

Introduction

Come, now, to Bethlehem.

How will we get there? The journey is long and the road is rough. It won't be an easy journey, but we must travel there.

And where does the journey start?

Some say it begins in Nazareth. For others, it starts in Bethlehem and travels the Ancient Near East over a thousand years. However, this story starts in time beyond our dreaming, before the universe exploded into being, at a time when all that existed was the Divine Source of Love.

Reading: John 1:1-5; 14

Narrator:

The story begins; and we join the story.

Come, now to Bethlehem;
join the journey.

Travel with us to see the Christ-child.

Octavian was recognised by his peers as being a respected and impressive emperor and was given the title "Augustus" to reflect his achievements. In his time there was peace on earth – Pax Romana. The old, divided loyalties were no more and there was anticipation his reign would usher in a golden age. He was the Prince of Peace and Son of God.

By the time the Gospel stories were written, approximately 80 years later, the golden age of peace had fallen apart. There was only the distant memory of a better time and the evidence of its complete destruction. Life under Octavian may have been hard for the ordinary person, but not as hard as what was about to come.

Reading: Luke 2: 1-3

Reading: Luke 2: 4-5

Narrator

Depending on the checkpoints, it's a two-hour drive today from Nazareth to Bethlehem; this is a 150km route. In Australia, it's not a distance we would think twice about driving but think about walking it.

The Cape-to-Cape walk, which covers a similar distance is a seven-day hike. While our Christmas plays often feature a donkey, reality is that Mary and Joseph were too poor. They would have walked.

Now think about walking that distance while heavily pregnant. Aching joints, swelling feet, waddling down the road. Imagine the relief each night finding somewhere to rest, a meal, a kind word, and a restless night's sleep.

What is the cost of this trip to Bethlehem? It's not necessarily a cost in monetary terms, but a cost of health, support, and care at such a critical time for mother and child. How will you get to Bethlehem and what will it cost you?

Reading: Luke 2: 6-7

Narrator

It's a mistranslation to say there was no room in the inn – the story tells us the guest room, the upstairs room, was too full. Villages were often simply extended families, and it was unusual to say the least to have had someone move so far away from home.

Perhaps Joseph's parents moved because the work as a builder's labourer was better in the north. Perhaps a grandfather had to run to hide from the Roman oppression. We can only imagine. Whatever his family's reasons for leaving Bethlehem, there would have been plenty of family members to welcome him back, even if it had been his great-grandparents who were the ones to leave. Family was strong in his culture, and hospitality to family and strangers alike was an obligation. Someone had to find room in this crowded and overfilled village.

In these circumstances, the guest room would have been busy to overflowing. Women cooking, children playing, husbands sitting on the roof and talking at the end of a long day working. Where to accommodate a teen labouring with her first child? The animal shelter under the house would have allowed privacy for the young mother-to-be, supported by the women of Joseph's family.

Imagine the relief that Mary feels when she arrives in Bethlehem, having arrived safely at the end of her long journey before the child is born. The relief is probably mixed with fear and uncertainty over what is coming next. What is your meaning on arriving in Bethlehem? What are the associated feelings you experience?

Reading: Luke 2: 8

Narrator

Being a builder's labourer, like Joseph, was the bottom of the polite but poor society. However, even they could look down on the shepherds. Everyone looked down on shepherds, much like the homeless people of today. The shepherds' stereotypes did little to commend them to the ordinary people.

This group of shepherds had finished their journey. They had spent the day leading their sheep (and goats) to good grazing and sources of water. Having secured them for the night, it was time to settle down for the night in a space where they could easily protect the flocks.

Perhaps a campfire guarded against the cold, winter wind. Perhaps the grog warmed them from the inside. Shepherds were literally and figuratively on the edge of society. They were going nowhere and everyone knew it.

Reading: Luke 2: 9-14

Narrator

Where did the angels come from? Where did they go?

The word "angel" simply means "messenger;" we all can be an angel when we are prepared to share love and hope with those whom we encounter. In sharing this message, the angels send the shepherds on a short journey.

However, the angels give to this baby the titles and honours that were once given to Octavian – Caesar Augustus. It is this baby, not the Caesar, who will bring joy and peace; it is this baby who will be the saviour of the world. Octavian, in his fancy palace in Rome, does not get anywhere near Bethlehem.

Who are you in this story? Octavian with his wealth or the marginalised shepherds to hear the news? Octavian who stays in Rome or the shepherds who set out to Bethlehem.

Reading: Luke 2: 15-20

Narrator

The shepherds took a risk in travelling to Bethlehem. What couple in their right mind would welcome *them* to see a new-born baby? Picture the exhausted mother resting at long last, a few of the experienced women of the family gathered around to look after her. Upstairs the

men are celebrating and drinking to celebrate the birth of a son, and the children are finally sleeping in clusters where they could find space. Into this home comes a bunch of strangers.

Who would welcome in strangers to such a scene? It is not as if the traditional rules of hospitality demanded it. Across cultures there are limits and traditions about who gets to see the baby and when. They all support the mother and baby to recover. None of them include having a mob of curious strangers wandering onto the scene.

The shepherds' trip could so easily be wasted simply because of who they were. Nevertheless, they left their flocks and went to see the child. They took a risk and that risk paid off. Their words and actions were treasured and had an impact long beyond that one visit.

Will you take the risk of the journey to Bethlehem?

Reading: Isaiah 52:7-10

Narrator:

This is not simply a story for long ago. It is a story for today.

It is a story that challenges us to think about who is in and who is out.

It is a story that asks us what risk we would take to see the Christ-child.

And it is a story that reminds us we are on a journey and that each journey is different.

As we come to the end of the story, I wonder what you are taking away. Is it simply a tale from long ago or a story that has meaning now?

Having travelled to Bethlehem, where will your journey take you? Will you let this story change your life?