

Trinity Baptist Church
Friday 25th December 2020 – Andy Banks
Philippians 2:5-11 ‘Made in human likeness’

[Read Phil 2:5-11]

5 *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

6 *who, being in very nature God,*

*did not consider equality with God something to be used
to his own advantage;*

7 *rather, he made himself nothing*

*by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

8 *And being found in appearance as a man,*

*he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!*

9 *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place*

and gave him the name that is above every name,

10 *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,*

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 *and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,*

to the glory of God the Father.

[Pray]

1) An ordinary night; an ordinary birth – born of Mary

“O Little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.” One of the things I love about that carol is the very ordinariness of the picture it paints. This happens every night – a town goes to sleep (perhaps less so these days), and the stars shine. And on *this* ordinary night, something distinctly ordinary happens – a new baby is born into the world – “born of Mary,” as the carol says. There are some extraordinary things that happen on this night – “the angels keep their watch of wondering love” – yet the core of what happens occurs about 250 times every minute around the world: a new baby is born into the world. Though usually momentous for the family involved, few such births have any real, lasting effect upon the world!

And *this* birth – save for the angels and the star which few saw or paid any attention to – this birth appears to be the same. An ordinary human birth. Not the *most* normal of surroundings, but let’s face it, babies have been born in *more* unusual places! An ordinary birth. “Born of Mary.” Or, as Paul puts it:

“taking the very nature of a *servant*,
being made in *human* likeness.”

“The very nature of a servant” means human nature. For to be truly human is to be a servant of God. He wasn’t just *like* a human, he didn’t just *appear* to be a man – that’s not what Paul means. He’s trying to find words to describe a mystery that is beyond words. But what he’s conveying is that Jesus was truly, fully human

– he took the very nature of a servant, a human. That was the point of the sketch earlier, with the grumpy teenager – it was meant to convey the very ordinary humanness of Jesus, the baby. No-one could have known, unless they were told, that this birth was going to change the world forever. It didn't look anything like that at all. Rather, "How *silently*, how *silently*, the wondrous gift is given"! Jesus, born of Mary.

2) An extraordinary night; an extraordinary birth – the everlasting Light

And yet, at the same time it was the most *extraordinary* night, the most *extraordinary* birth there has ever been or will ever be. "Yet, in thy dark streets shineth *the everlasting Light*." Or, as Paul puts it:

"Christ Jesus:
 who, being in very nature *God*,
 did not consider equality with God something to be used
 to his own advantage;
 rather, he made himself nothing
 by taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness."

The ancient world was full of legends of gods who used their powers to manipulate everything to their own advantage – with humanity as their playthings. But the truth about the real God is utterly different. Jesus was and is in his very nature God. But he *emptied* himself of everything which made him recognisably divine, he made himself *nothing*, he became a *servant*. On this supremely extraordinary night, the most extraordinary thing ever happened – God himself was born into the world as a human and came right into our midst.

"What if God was one of us?" Joan Osborne sung some 25 years ago. Of course, the song explores its theme through modern imagery – "just a slob like one of us, just a stranger on a bus." I suspect it may actually be quite negative towards Christian faith, but somehow it helps *me* to take in the incredible mystery of this extraordinary truth: God took upon himself a normal, everyday human life. What we read in the gospels are the extraordinary highlights of that life – the moments when heaven very definitely touched earth through Jesus. But in-between those moments, were many, many times when Jesus just did ordinary human things – eating, sleeping, talking, laughing, crying, woodwork, studying – the extraordinary truth of Christmas is that God made himself nothing and did ordinary human things! He took on the very nature of a servant.

3) A self-giving night; a self-giving birth – the blessings of his heaven

But that word servant works in two directions – Jesus became a servant of *God* by becoming human, but he also became a servant of *humanity* by becoming human. "So God imparts to *human* hearts the blessings of his heaven." How? In many different ways during his lifetime – in wise teaching, in compassionate healings, in gentle restoration to normal life. But supremely he became our servant because:

"he humbled himself
 by becoming obedient to death –
 even death on a cross!"

And he did that for us. We deserved his death because of our sin against God. But God took the death we deserved in place of us, so we could be made truly alive in him. And that course was firmly decided way before

Jesus was born on that ordinary, yet extraordinary, night. It was the reason Jesus took on human flesh. This was a self-giving night, a self-giving birth, bringing the blessings of his heaven to earth.

*“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”*

4) A life-giving night; a life-giving birth – be born in us today

It was a self-giving night, but also a life-giving night, a life-giving birth, for all who will gladly bow the knee now and acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. For, “No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.” So, will you receive him this Christmas, or will you keep him and his offer of life at arms’ length? And I don’t just mean, “Will you receive him for the first time?” I mean, will you receive him, whatever you’re going through and in whatever way you need life this Christmas, will you receive him?

When he enters into our lives, he changes us – always for the better – to become more like him and to enable us to spread his life and light to others. Hence, Paul urges, “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.” Seek to become like him – the same humility, the same servant-heartedness, the same self-giving, life-giving love. In a world that is stumbling in darkness, how can you bring Christ’s light? In a world that is crushed by anxiety and fear, sin and selfishness, where can you be a blessing this Christmastime? For we are called to be channels through whom Christ can shine his light. And whenever Christ shines his self-giving, life-giving light, ordinary days are transformed into extraordinary days, as heaven’s blessings are brought to earth.

We can’t bring light ourselves. We can only bring *his* light. And we can only truly bring his light if we have ourselves *received* his light. So, let our cry be that of the carol writer this Christmas, “Oh holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.” Amen?

[Pray]