

This **might** sound familiar. Husband and wife decided to do their Christmas shopping at a large shopping mall.

They agreed, when the husband finished his shopping, he would go to M&S to meet her, for a spot of lunch.

He finished his shopping, entered the M&S store and panicked! It was HUGE. Where might he find his wife? He could see three floor levels; might there be more? They should have agreed to a meeting place for their rendezvous. Too late now; next time for sure!

A quick gallop around the entire first floor, then down the escalator to the bargain basement. No sign of her. Back onto the moving stairs, glancing frantically in all directions for a glimpse of her that would put an end to his growing fear of never seeing her again.

Then, from the middle of the escalator going up, as the vision of the bottom floor was disappearing, he sighted her! Unable to push his way to the head of the crowded escalator, and frantic not to lose her, as soon he reached the top, he swung around and started the decent, stabilising himself on the moving stairs with the weight and bulk of his shopping in both hands. He looked around and his wife had vanished among the clothing. At least she was there somewhere. Once down, a quick sprint in the direction of the last sighting, and she was not to be found. Sweating and out of breath as he made his way around the floor, FINALLY, on the other side from where she was sighted, there she was, unperturbed and disinterested with her husband's trauma. She said she would be in M&S and that was it. "But dear, if we had decided on a time and place ..."

If only he had phoned and cancelled their credit and debit cards, she would have come looking for him!

Well! It's over! Its done! Christmas is here! You cannot buy any presents for anyone, anymore this year.

The morning after, the night before Jesus' birth, was as different as chalk and cheese. His birth changed the lives of everyone who was drawn into it.

It is ironic, perhaps even paradoxical, lives were being transformed 30 some years **before** Jesus went about changing the lives of people through his teaching, preaching and healing.

The priest **Zechariah**'s life was transformed when an Angel appeared in the inner Temple and told him he and wife Elisabeth would have a son who should be set apart in early life as, *he will be great before the Lord ... he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God ...to make ready for the Lord, a people prepared.*<sup>1</sup>

On returning home, his wife **Elisabeth**'s life changed. *This is the Lord's doing, He answers prayer, according to His purpose. How affectionate is God's love! He has taken away my disgrace of not having children.*<sup>2</sup>

**Mary**'s life was transformed. At God's chosen time, an angel was dispatched from heaven to visit this young Jewish maiden, living a normal life, in a small village in Galilee. Talk about show-stoppers and life-changing plans. *How can this be?! What will people think? What will Mama say? How am I supposed to pull this off? What is God up to? And why me, of all people?*

**Joseph**'s life was transformed. To be told, the young lady who has won his heart and affection, and for whom he has been building a home, is pregnant, and she left **with haste**, to visit her cousin, 100 miles away, rattled him.

Then, one restless night, it took an intervention from Heaven to stop Joseph proceeding down the divorce route, and he *took Mary as His wife*<sup>3</sup>, into their home.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:15-17

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:25

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 1:24

**The families** of Mary and Joseph must have been transformed. Her folks might be of the opinion, *maybe their traveling to Bethlehem is a good idea. The census is God-sent! Get the girl away so the neighbours won't suspect.* His folks might have suggested, *let them stay in Bethlehem after the baby's birth, so nosy people around here will lose track of the years. Joseph has a portable skill; he can be a carpenter in Bethlehem.*

The Angel **Gabriel** was transformed. This was his *five-minutes-of-fame*, his split-second in the spotlight, making the greatest announcement ever—the one awaited since the fiasco in the Garden of Eden—and the audience is not the mighty and the famous, rather a small group of wide-eyed, unsophisticated shepherds. Will they appreciate what I say, understand its meaning, drop everything and go? Or will they be as dull as the religious leaders in Jerusalem?

The **angelic choir** had a unique experience, praising God outside the safety of the presence of God in Heaven! Were they casting pearls before swine (excuse the bad metaphor!), *praising God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom He is well pleased?* After all, these shepherds were thought of as crude, uncultured, some might have called them *plebs* as they walked by.

Each of the **shepherds** lives was transformed. When in the past they delivered sheep to the Temple, they might have heard prayers and liturgical chants, praising God, repeating the prophets' words of the coming Saviour, but did they ever imagine the announcement of His arrival would be made to **them**, using words heard only in the Temple? We know their lives were transformed because Luke tells us, *all who heard their excited description of what they had seen and heard, wondered what they were talking about ... they returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 2:18, 20

The lives of **citizens of Jerusalem**, the **religious leaders** and **King Herod** himself must have been transformed when a group of foreign visitors showed up asking, "*Where is He who has been born king of the Jews?*" That set the cat among the pigeons, and Jerusalem's gossip mill would have been smoking!

Last Sunday, I mentioned, the story of Christmas is a story of two loves: the love of God for each of us, mirrored in Mary and Joseph's love for each other.

Today, consider the story of Christmas as two halves: those who acted in obedience to God's call and declaration and those who did not. Zechariah and Elisabeth, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, all acted in obedience.

The **citizens of Jerusalem**, the **religious leaders'**, however, were too busy and caught up with their own lives to walk 5-6 miles to Bethlehem to see for themselves, the prophet Micah words they knew so well, *Although you Bethlehem are too small and insignificant to be counted among the army groups from clans of Judah, **from you will come One who will rule Israel for me, the Messiah.***<sup>5</sup>

So this Christmas, after the sumptuous Christmas dinner, after the dishes are done, after the last of the wrapping paper and ribbon is gathered, and you settle down with a cup of tea or coffee, or even port or brandy, consider this:

God gives us a gift, which comes unwrapped, and is far more valuable than anything we have ever received. God's gift is given in love. His Son comes to cheat death of its grip on us, and release us to eternal life with Him.

Let me close with this from my memory bank. Many, many years ago, a little girl was part of a gathering of several families celebrating Christmas. She was too young to read *To-From* and the notes written on her presents.

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<sup>5</sup> Micah 5:2

As she was given each gift, she conferred with the adult parent beside her, to be told who had given her the present. She then searched for the giver, went over to thank them with a big hug and a kiss, **before** returning to open her present.

She seemed to have an inherent trust in the givers, assuming that the gifts were good and worthy of gratitude, **before** knowing its contents.

This innocent child's gesture of genuine gratitude made me to consider a simple truth: in order to be **truly** grateful, we must first acknowledge we have been given a gift, and identify the giver.

What do we know about the Giver of this precious Christmas gift?

Do we really know Him?

What about the gift; has it been unwrapped, or is it still in its original packaging as a baby doll in a manger?

Perhaps the most important question to consider whilst resting after the cacophony of Christmas day is, **Am I worthy to receive this gift?**

The Giver did not save in a Christmas club, He did not have cash in an investment, nor break a deposit. He gave the most precious thing He has, out of His love for you. He does not want a Secret Santa gift exchange; all He wants is for you to accept His gift, open it, understand it and be thankful and grateful for it; your genuine, heartfelt, sincere gratitude, is worship, and worshipping God, delights Him.

Open God's gift, and make it your own. It will transform your life, as it did to those at the time of Jesus' birth, and has done for countless people, since.

Will you do that? If you do, His home is open to you, and that is one decision you will never regret!

**AMEN.**