

Luke 2:16-20

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Date: 20 December 2009

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[0 : 00] Let's turn together in God's Word to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, and we'll read again verses 17 to 20.

Luke, chapter 2, at verse 17. Luke, chapter 3, verse 17.

These were men who had met with Jesus Christ.

Now certainly there was a lot missing in their full understanding of who this newborn baby was. They knew nothing as yet of His atoning death, of His triumphant resurrection, of His ascension into heaven, of His sending out His Holy Spirit to indwell His church, and to direct them in the great missionary task of the church.

[1 : 41] These things were still hidden to these men. But nonetheless, heaven had come down to them.

The Savior had been revealed to them. And there was a great deal that they had been told, as we see in the song, the words, and then the song of the angels.

They were told of Christ, the Anointed One. And as Jews, they would have known full well the reference to God's great, longed-for, foretold King and Savior.

And they had been told that He was the Son of David, of the line of David, born there, where they knew that David had been born and brought up in Bethlehem, around whose hills they were tending their sheep.

And they were told in these great words of the angels, He, the Son of God, of the line of David, He has been born to you.

[2 : 55] And so, they were made aware that this was a very personal revelation from God to them. The God of heaven had come to them that night and told them of the Savior.

And their lives would never be the same again. So, the question that, I don't know if they would have asked it, because what they do now comes so automatically and spontaneously to them.

They spread the word and so on. But the question was now, what next? God has come to us. His Son, the Savior, has been revealed to us.

We've come to understand things relating to heaven and to our souls and our salvation that we never knew before. So, what next? And that question is one for us tonight.

We have read twice now today here in this church and, of course, so much elsewhere. We have read of the birth of Jesus Christ.

[4 : 11] And this question, what now? What does that mean? It's a relevant one for everybody who on Thursday night will attend a midnight mass or a carols by candlelight, candlelight.

Many parents and children and friends who will have gone to nativity plays. And something of the babe of Bethlehem will have come home to them.

But the question that is asked, that needs to be asked, what then? If God has revealed His Son to us, if God has made known His salvation in Jesus, what difference is that going to make in our society?

How is that going to change me from day to day? And verses 17 to 20 show us the reaction that that brought about in the lives of these shepherds.

You'll notice that it's a two-pronged reaction. And we're going to notice the two strands of their reaction.

[5 : 34] But also, how did the people who became aware of their reaction, to whom they made known what had happened, how did they respond?

And so we'll see not only a reaction from the shepherds, but a response from others. And just as with the shepherds, it's a two-pronged response.

Just let's notice that before we look at each of them. In verses 17 and then 20, we read that when they had seen Him, they spread the word.

That's the first thing they did. They met with Jesus Christ. And the first thing they did, well, we know they hurried there to Bethlehem and there they saw Him.

But then the first thing they did, they spread the word concerning this child. But they had another reaction, which you find in verse 20.

[6 : 36] So there is a spreading of the word about Jesus Christ, and there is a glorifying and praising God every step of the way in the lives that lay ahead of them.

But then you also see here the response of other people to their reactions, to those two reactions. And that again, as I say, has a double strand.

In verse 18, there is the response of people in general who hear what they have to say, and they are amazed.

And the other response, a more narrow one, if you like, because it focuses on one person only, is that of Mary.

And she, we read, she listened to all they had to say. She treasured up all they had said and all she had seen in her heart, and she pondered it all.

[7 : 52] She thought it through. So we're going to look at these four things. Firstly, the two reactions, and then the two responses. The first reaction of the shepherds is that of a life of worship.

And I'm taking verse 20, and then verse 17. So first of all, there is a life of worship from now on. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God.

Now, in spite of the fact that as you read in the Old Testament Scriptures, I don't know how well these shepherds would have known them. As Jews, they should have known them well.

But at any rate, in those Old Testament Scriptures, you find a great deal that is very commendatory, high-flowing language sometimes, of shepherds.

David, after all, was a shepherd boy, called by God to be king of Israel. But we read of the kings and the priests of Israel being described as shepherds.

[9 : 05] I have sent you, God says, through Ezekiel, to shepherd my people Israel. And indeed, the highest accolade of all, you find when God describes himself as a shepherd, taking the lambs tenderly in his arms, going out to look for and care for the strays and the wounded and the distressed.

So, the shepherd had a high standing. And yet, we're told by those who describe to us life in those days, writers like, for example, Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, but many others, will tell us that very often, shepherds at the time of Jesus were marginalized, that socially and religiously, they were at the very bottom of the ladder.

Because of the nature of their work, they could hardly ever be there at temple or at synagogue worship. And for whatever reasons, others as well, it may be, it does seem that they were despised and a marginalized class.

And they would have been aware of it. And therefore, when the word of God and the glorious revelation from heaven comes down to earth, they would have realized that it was utterly incredible that this should have happened to them, to the likes of them, poor shepherds, despised by others, marginalized in society.

And yet God had come to them and made known His grace and His love to them. They knew that Israel had been waiting long for God's revelation of His Messiah.

[11 : 12] He'd been promised through the prophets for not just centuries, but millennia. He had been promised His coming, that God would bring the great deliverer to His people.

And all of Israel, from the highest to the lowest, they were waiting. It said that every Jewish mother hoped that maybe her son would be the Messiah.

Well, here, the revelation had come that Messiah was there and that He had been made known to them. Poor folk like them had received God's wondrous good news.

And they had learned through what had been told them that God is true and trustworthy. That they could trust Him and that they could know in the depth of their being that He was true.

And you find that, of course, again in verse 20 because it says, the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told.

[12:23] God revealed Himself in His glorious attributes of truth and covenant faithfulness and He did it to them.

Now, we don't know, of course, what happened to these men. It was 30 years later before this baby would begin His God-given ministry.

Perhaps some of them were dead by then. We just don't know. But I can't help feeling that after such a revelation and the reaction that they themselves show, how they felt about it and what they did, I can't help feeling that these men went on to live for God.

They went on to do all in their lives to the glory of God. And if they or some of them were alive 30 years later and then 33 years later at the time of the crucifixion and resurrection and coming of the Spirit, what amazing new light was now coming to them.

They, more than anyone else, would know that what was revealed to us then, oh, the glory of it then but the glory of it now that Messiah, we understand why He came and what He did and how He brings us into this great and glorious new family, the family of God, the community of the Spirit and we, marginalized may be, despised by many, but we are part of that new people of God.

[14:12] And what happened to them, of course, as we put the question to ourselves, is what should happen to us? That we too, if we have met with Jesus Christ, then it is not an option, but it is our calling to go out as they did, to praise and to glorify God wherever we might be, out on an oil rig, in a school, in a hospital, in our home, amongst our neighbors, wherever we might be, whatever we might be doing, day after day, year after year, glorifying and praising God that our life of worship might be a life of testimony to the Jesus who has saved us and whom we love and want to serve.

So, there is the first reaction, a life of worship. The other reaction from these shepherds, having met with Jesus in Bethlehem, you find in verse 17.

When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. And their spreading of the word, the word of God, focused, obviously, on Jesus Christ.

What they had been told about this child, the Son of God, the Savior, Messiah Jesus. Jesus. They felt that they had to communicate what had been revealed to them.

Theirs was the spirit of the apostles who, when they were told just to shut up and not speak anymore in the name of this Jesus, they replied, you remember, to the religious leaders of the day, we cannot but speak.

[16:10] The things that we have seen and heard. I'm sure a few of you have seen or read about the recent court case where a couple hotel owners in Liverpool were taken to court accused of religious hatred or religious persecution, as it were, of a lady, a Muslim lady, who had been staying in their hotel.

Now, I don't know all the details or the background, just what I've read, like anyone else. Maybe they could have been more tactful. Maybe they could have been more gentle in the way they tried to introduce the message.

I don't know. I simply don't know. But what we can say is that they were right to want to commend Jesus Christ.

They were right to have that longing in their hearts to share the good news. And those of you who have read the case will be very happy that it was dismissed.

So, the spirit of the shepherds must be the spirit of every single Christian man or woman.

[17:29] And you find as you go through the Bible, right from the beginning, you find that this is an essential element of being a child of God.

However, unpolitically correct it may be, however, many may wish that we would always keep quiet, keep our religion a private affair, nothing to do with the ordinary everyday life and so on.

We as Christians can't have such an attitude. Of course, we must be tactful. Of course, we must be loving. Of course, we must be careful. Of course, we must pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance so that we know when to speak and when to be silent.

But think a way back to, for example, when the Israelites came out of Egypt, out of the bondage of those 400 years and they crossed the Red Sea and God obviously is not going to allow them to be back under the bondage of Pharaoh and of sin.

And the first thing that they do, they gather together and they praise God, they sing as the shepherds did, of course, glorifying and praising God. But they are calling for all the peoples to know what God has done for his people Israel.

[18 : 49] And not so long afterwards, when they're wandering through the desert, there's that man, the brother-in-law of Moses and he's from a pagan background, worshipping, no doubt, heathen gods.

And Moses says to him, come with us and we will do you good. And that's always the attitude, not just of the shepherds, but the attitude of every believing soul.

We long that others in our families, among our friends, and our neighbors, and so on, that they would come not with us because of who we are, but because of what God is in Jesus Christ and has revealed himself to us and desires to do so to them.

Go down through the centuries in the Old Testament. Think of the deliverance when Israel was besieged by the Syrian army and when the invading army fled.

God had his purposes to relieve the city and the four lepers who go out into the Syrian camp and they find that everyone has gone and there are unimaginable riches and food and drink and so they gather so much for themselves and then, then they stop and say, hey, just a minute, this is a day of glad tidings and we hold our peace.

[20 : 15] No, we can't do that. And so they rush back into the city and they cry, deliverance, salvation, God has brought good news for his people.

The enemy have been defeated, they've fled. And as we sing psalm after psalm after psalm, we think of, for example, Psalm 126 as the people are delivered from another bondage and they go out amazed.

How is it that God could use a pagan emperor to free his people? But he did so unexpectedly. And then they sing, they among the heathen said, the Lord great things for us had brought.

They want all the heathen nations round about to know that their God is a God of deliverance and a God of salvation. And as Jesus himself, after the shepherds have seen him, as he eventually enters into his public ministry, and people are healed.

And sometimes because of the time of God's purposes, not yet ripe, fully, to be revealed as was God's purpose.

[21 : 27] And so he says to some, don't tell others, but they go off and they must, they must, they feel, tell others of their healing, tell others of their salvation, tell others of the joy that is now theirs.

A couple of days ago, my wife and I bought our tickets for the annual performance of Handel's Messiah in the Asher Hall in Edinburgh, the 2nd of January.

It's always traditionally that day. And those of you who know it well, I'm sure many do, it's all scripture, of course, but how often the same thought comes through there, say to the cities of Judah, behold your God, right up to the great, hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigns and let the world know and let us be his heralds, let us be his messengers who say, not just to the cities of Judah, but to our own cities and to the whole world.

And this is true, isn't it? Of the whole history of the church in every age. As it happens, I've just been rereading a biography, one of Wycliffe and another of Tyndale.

And it's very striking how the time of Wycliffe, his followers known as the Lollards, they didn't have as full a revelation of scripture as we have the translation that Wycliffe and his colleagues did.

[23 : 06] It was defective in many ways. It was done from the Latin, not from the original languages. And yet, with what they had, these people, and they were just ordinary folks, tradesmen and merchants and wives and mothers, out they went among their neighbors, among their friends in the villages and towns of England, many of them paying with their very lives for their making known, their doing what the shepherds did, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

Yes, it was the case that these shepherds, by many, were despised because of the kind of job they did and the kind of ceremonial uncleanness that it was felt stuck to them.

They were ignorant and unlearned men, no doubt, in the eyes of the learned and the rulers. But you know, they'd seen Christ.

They'd seen God's Savior, God's Son, Jesus. And so, they had to, as our text tells us, they had to spread the word.

And you and I must therefore be enthusiastic in following that example probably not a lot of people in the Free Church have yet seen a document.

[24 : 45] It's not a lengthy document, but it's been prepared by the Home Mission Board. I imagine the author is their full-time worker now, Neil McMillan.

And it's on the topic of church planting, the call, the challenge that comes to the Free Church of Scotland in such a pagan nation as we now are in.

And I was very impressed and refreshed by what I read. I received it because I'm an elder in our congregation and it had been circulated in opinion so we wanted.

but the thrust of it was we have received the good news of Jesus Christ. And as a church we are called to make known to the multitudes around us.

Of course there are multitudes to the ends of the earth, but those around us in Aberdeen, in Edinburgh, in Scotland, in our highlands make known what so many are so ignorant of.

[25 : 50] And the point is made that we simply can't say, well we're short of ministers and so we can't really expand.

Or we're short of money to support these ministers. Both these things are true. But I'm glad to say that this document encourages us as congregations, as a denomination, to be imaginative and seeking fresh ways of communicating as these men did the good news concerning this child, Jesus. And even if a lot of us here tonight cannot be directly involved as is envisaged for some at least in this document, because we're not young enough to do what once we did, because there are mothers who have full-time responsibilities with children, families, because there are people who are engaged in very time-consuming jobs.

There's a great deal that we can't do, but we can encourage and we can pray and we can support and we can ask that God would give us the spirit of these men who having seen Jesus went out and spread the word.

So there's the double reaction on the part of these two men, a life of worship and a life of witness. Now, what about the people to whom they spread the word?

[27 : 36] And here we find a double reaction or a double response. First of all, there is an emotional response. Verse 18, all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Now, it's not surprising that folks should be amazed. Was it really possible that thousands of years of waiting and longing, they knew the longings of the prophets?

Indeed, they knew that angels desired to look into these things. Was it possible that now, in their day and age, that this had been fulfilled?

And was it possible that Messiah, God's Messiah, the Son of David, that he should be in a manger, a manger, in a stable?

That's what the shepherds were saying. Was that really so? Now, I'm sure that among those who were amazed, there must have been some who genuinely believed that this was indeed, as they had said, that God had come to redeem his people.

[29 : 03] And if 30 years later they were alive, when Jesus went out to perform his ministry and then to die on Calvary's cross, they would have acknowledged him with great joy and gladness.

But I'm sure that there were others, because we know it from Scripture and we know it from personal experience. There were others, I'm sure, who were amazed for a short time and then who just forgot about it.

There were those when Jesus came and began his ministry who did follow him with enthusiasm because they'd eaten the loaves and the fishes, because their loved ones had been healed, because they had political hopes.

they went to make him king. They wanted Rome, the oppressor, to be overthrown. But then, as Jesus himself says, as with a heavy heart, he puts the question to them, will you also go away?

So, there was emotion, but it was not an emotion that led to faith or to God glorifying action.

[30 : 28] And we could go through the whole of the experience of the apostles and their preaching and so on and find the same thing to be true. Now, of course, we're not saying that there shouldn't be emotion in our response to Jesus Christ.

Who would not be moved to the depths of their being, emotionally moved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ? But God, warns that while indeed there should be emotion, he warns against mere outward impressions, as I fear may well have been the case for many of these people who heard the shepherds.

You may remember words that God spoke through Hosea to his people in those days. Your love is like the morning mist, like the early Jew that disappears.

And always, you and I must put the question, because I don't know everybody here this evening. It may be that you're here with us this evening.

You want to come and join our worship, but you can't say in your own experience that you have committed your life to Jesus Christ.

[31 : 54] You may be interested or impressed, I don't know. But what I do know is that as then, so now, there is always the danger of wrong motives and superficial responses and impressions.

It's a wonderful thing to keep up the traditions. I love Christmas. I love the nativity plays. I love the carols.

I love everything about it. And then when it passes, well, what it really means in my life is virtually nothing.

It may be the traditions, it may be perhaps the aesthetics, some of the beauty, the outward beauty of the Christian message and the Christian church.

Some years ago, I was listening to a radio interview given by P.D. James, the famous crime writer, and she indicated in this interview that she was a regular attender at her local parish church.

[33 : 14] church. She wasn't much in favor of any modernization. She liked the old prayer book and the old forms of worship and so on.

And as the interviewer pressed her a little more, she said, well, no, I don't, I don't believe a lot of their doctrine.

And I think she specified things like the incarnation and the miracles and the resurrection. She said, that doesn't matter. What really matters is, and the word stuck in my mind till today, is the continuity of it all.

For hundreds of years, thousands of years here in England, we have had the continuity of the church. You see how it's possible, as no doubt with many, amazed, or perhaps moved, emotionally stirred, sentimentally affected, but that is not a true meeting with Jesus Christ.

that is not a true knowledge of him or a true life of service to the Savior. So then, we find that response, an emotional response, but then finally, there is a thoughtful response.

[34 : 46] And you have that in verse 19. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in our heart. And you'll know how at the end of this chapter, when Jesus was, when Jesus was 12 years old, and they went up to Jerusalem to the temple, and then in verse 51, it says, after the very interesting experience there, they went back to Nazareth, and his mother, we read, treasured all these things in our heart.

So her attitude as she heard about these things was to keep them in our heart and to ponder them deeply. I guess she must have pondered deeply what Simeon said to her sometime after the birth. And you have it also recorded, of course, here in this chapter, from verse 29 onwards, but particularly verse 34, where Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, this child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed, and a sword will pierce your own soul too. Don't you think that Mary, to quote the earlier words, she must have pondered that one deeply in her heart, and she knew what it meant 33 years later as she stood by the cross and saw the agony of her son.

now again, when we say that hers is a thoughtful response, we mustn't put that against the earlier emotional response.

[36 : 45] Mary was not unemotional, though she thought deeply. Read her own song that we know as the Magnificat, my soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Plenty emotion there. And so here is Mary, emotionally moved, but also thoughtful. As she hears the message, let's say, because it's the season, the message of Christmas, the birth of the babe. She thinks it through. She realizes that she doesn't understand everything about this son that has been born to her, but she treasured what she did know and kept increasing in knowledge and applying it throughout her life.

At times, according to the gospel, she got it wrong. In chapter two, the passage that I quoted a moment ago, you remember when Jesus stayed in the temple, she and Joseph they go, and Mary it is who says, son, why have you treated us like this?

Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you. She had not fully understood who this son was, even though she had had the revelation from God of his unique supernatural birth.

[38 : 08] And it may be that Mary was involved later on in Mark chapter 3, verse 21, we read of an occasion when Jesus was so busy healing people and teaching people that he didn't have time to eat.

And we read that his family, when they heard about this, they went to take charge of him for they said, he is out of his mind. Was that just his brothers who didn't believe or was Mary part of that? We don't know. But there is a progressive revelation. God is showing her more and more, and that takes her eventually to the cross, to the resurrection, to the community of the spirit of which we read in the book of Acts, that she formed a part.

And as we close this evening, there are ways, I think, as we ask our original question, these men met with Jesus. What then?

What next? I think that as we put it to ourselves, Mary can be in some ways a pattern to all of us. just a country girl.

[39 : 19] She had no political influence. She had virtually no community responsibility, given her status in that society as a woman.

And she was called, of course, to be a wife and a mother with a growing family. Very ordinary, just as perhaps many of us here are also doing our ordinary jobs in our ordinary situations.

And yet, I hope and pray, we've met with Jesus Christ. Through Him, we've come to believe in God, to understand who Jesus was, why He came, and we have bowed to His sovereignty.

And friends, pondering is very, very good. But as with Mary, as with the shepherds, let it lead for us, too, to action, spreading the Word, and praising and glorifying God.

Let's bow in prayer. Amen. Amen.