Christmas: Historical, Rooted, Miraculous and Humbling
Luke 2:1-7

Over the last few weeks we've been looking at some of the key texts in the gospels, as they build up to Jesus' birth. Today, we get to look at the event itself. But as we do, let me ask you, did anything strike you about the way Luke describes it? And in particular the way he describes those events in comparison to the claims Christianity makes for those events?

You see, Christianity claims that 2000 years ago, at this very first Christmas, God became human, that God the Son, the one *by* whom and *through* whom and *for* whom all things were created, was incarnated as a tiny and vulnerable baby, and that he was born into our world. And yet, what do we get as a record of that incredible claim? A list of who was ruling where, and who had to travel where. Of who was descended from whom and who was married to whom. Of where there was room and where there wasn't.

And when you see that contrast, between the exalted claims of Christianity and the way it's presented, the way it comes into being, you might think, 'is that it? I mean, Luke, is your story not going to be colourful, more dramatic, more *divine* than that?'

Except, what I want you to see is that it's that restraint that tells you this really happened. And not just happened, but down to today has the power to change the way you see God, and the way you see yourself.

So I want us to see 4 things, firstly that Christianity is grounded in history. Secondly, it's rooted in place and promise; thirdly, it's miraculous in its birth; and fourthly, it's profoundly humbling.

Christianity is Grounded in History
Look at v1, 'In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.' And in his day, Augustus was the greatest of kings, and the kingdom he ruled the greatest of empires. And in his own lifetime coins were minted with his image, bearing the inscription - Augustus, Son of the Divine, Father of the Fatherland, Pontifex maximus - *the* high priest.

So right from the beginning, Christianity entered a spiritually charged world. It wasn't so much that there were multiple religions as that there were multiple gods and Augustus was their chief priest. And yet within that pantheon of gods a movement developed called Gnosticism. And Gnosticism believed that matter, this material world, and your physical body was bad, but the spiritual - including your inner spirit - was good. And the great goal of life was to escape this physical world, including your body, and to do that you needed to be inducted into a hidden, mystical knowledge of the divine.

It's why people argue that our own age is increasingly gnostic. Because it's not physical facts that matter, but feelings. It's not your body, or biology, that tells you who or what you are, but who you think or feel yourself to be. And the authentic, the real you is inner, psychological, spiritual you.

But in just such a world, Luke grounds all that follows in history. In facts he researched, and that you can go do the same. And so in an age, then and now, when you struggle to know what's true or to be trusted, Luke is saying: look this is real, this happened.

And he goes on. Verse 2, 'This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.' And Quirinius was governor between 6 and 7AD, and historians know he conducted a census in

6AD - a census Luke mentions in his second volume, Acts. The problem is, that census can't be this census. Because we know from both Luke and Matthew that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod. And Herod died in 4BC, 10 years before Quirinius' census. So does that mean Luke has not done quite so good a job at his historical research accuracy after all?

And the answer's no. You see, the word our Bibles translate *governor* is *hēgemoneuontos* - which could mean anything from a governor down to an administrator. So maybe Quirinius wasn't yet governor. Maybe he was still working his way up the ranks. Maybe he was simply responsible for administering this census. And maybe Augustus thought he did such a good job, next time round he got the governorship. I mean, in some of our countries people get promoted to government roles for all sorts of reasons, don't they! Why not a well run census?

Or, look again at what Luke writes, 'This was *the first* registration when Quirinius was governor.' And that word 'first' is the word *protos*. Which, apparently, could equally be translated 'before' - so maybe Luke is saying, 'this was the census *before* Quirinius was governor, before the census he took, the famous one in 6AD, that caused an uprising I'm going to tell you about in vol 2.'

Whatever the answer, Luke's point is clear, isn't it? The event I'm going to describe to you happened and happened in history.

But think why it happened - I mean, why would Augustus order a census? And the answer? Taxes. So this is not a story of fluffy pink unicorns is it? Luke is grounding all this in the real world, your world, of governments and bureaucracy and taxation. 'Great!' You might think, 'But not exactly inspiring!'

Except, in a world in danger of sinking in a mush of feelings, where physical facts are being discarded and you're told you have to make up your own reality, as you go along, Christianity offers you something concrete. Something that can ground you and ground you in history.

Christianity is Rooted in Place and Promise

Firstly, look at v2-4 and the list of names: 'Syria… Galilee… Nazareth… Judea… Bethlehem.' So the coming of Christ is literally rooted in a land and a soil - in places you can go visit.

And in his book, *Sensing Jesus*, American pastor Zack Eswine discusses the significance of Jesus being known as Jesus *of Nazareth*. That he lived in a specific place, at a specific time, within a specific culture and social context. But what's true of Nazareth is true of Bethlehem.

So think about those two places. Because Nazareth and Bethlehem were nowhere places, insignificant backwaters in a tiny and insignificant province of a vast Empire. And yet, it's with them that Christ has forever associated himself.

Now, think how that compares to the places Instagram, or social media, or your friends, train you and condition you to prefer. The lights, the buzz, the views, the photo opportunities - the big and the extraordinary. The places everyone else says you should go. But Jesus chooses the small and the ordinary.

And the thing is, most of us will spend our lives in the small and the ordinary, in the unremarkable. Living the kind of life, loving the kind of people no-one posts on the gram. And maybe you'll

wonder whether you've missed it,. And the answer's, no. It's precisely in places like *that* that Jesus chose to root himself.

And in rooting himself he limited himself. He had neighbours and friendship circles. He had routines and rhythms. And so he wasn't a butterfly, or a wandering spirit, flitting from this to that. Instead, he lived an embodied life with all the limits and boundaries of that life.

But again, we're trained to think that's *so* limiting, that we need to live an unbounded, unrooted life where no one can place demands on me. Where I'm free. The problem is, such a life leaves you exhausted, and the constant movement, or the desire to escape the ordinary, and be someone of significance leaves you frayed.

And so it's into our restlessness that a rooted Jesus says, 'come to me you who are weary and I can give you rest.' You see, does Christianity offer you something transcendent, something that will lift you up and out of your smallness? Absolutely. But it begins by being rooted in the real world of name and place.

But it's also rooted in promise - a promise to David and a promise to Bethlehem. Look at v4: 'And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.'

And a thousand years before, when David was King, he wanted to build God a house, a temple. But how did God respond? 'Go for it David, you owe me at least that'? No. 2 Samuel 7:11-13, 'No David' 'The LORD declares to you that the LORD will make *you* a house… I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body… and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.'

And so as you watch Mary and Joseph, descendants in the line of David, making their way to Bethlehem, the city of David, you are watching God keeping his promise.

And not just to David. Because seven hundred years before, God spoke through Micah, 'But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.' (Mic 5:2).

But the promise is not just to David or to Bethlehem, but the world. Because as you read the Psalms and the prophets what becomes clear is that this ruler, this king out of Bethlehem, will be the king over every king - 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he,… And he shall speak peace *to the nations*; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River *to the ends of the earth*.' (Zech 9:9-10).

Great isn't it? Except when you consider the time lag. Because God promised all this hundreds, even a thousand plus years before its fulfilment even began. So as Mary and Joseph thread their way to Bethlehem, you can know that God always keeps his promises, but his timing may not be yours.

And you may be enduring something now that you wish was already over, and you wish God would come through for you, and you read that he works all things for your good, but at the moment you're not seeing it. And the waiting, and the longing is verging on discouragement and disillusion.

So hear what Paul writes to the Galatians, '*When the fullness of time had come,* God sent forth his Son, born of woman.' (Gal 4:4). That at just the right time, God said 'now is the time.'

You see, Christianity's not just rooted in time and place and promise. It's rooted in the sovereignty of God. And the same is true for you.

Look it up on Google Maps, and this journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is somewhere around 160KM. Now imagine Mark telling a still heavily pregnant Laurianne, or just a few weeks back Wilson telling Anna-Lize, or Michael telling Anna, or Ben telling Grace, 'Darling, we're going on a road trip' lovely where? 'You've got to walk or get on this donkey - for 160km.' It's not exactly living your best life now, is it? You don't find any Smartboxes in Manor with that offer on it.

And yet Mary is carrying the Son of God. Do you think there was anything Mary - or even Joseph - wanted to do less than make this trip? So are they outside the will of God? Or has God abandoned them and given up on them? No! It's the exact opposite - and everything that's happening is happening in the sovereign plan of God.

But it probably didn't feel like that, did it? Don't you think there were times when they felt they were at the whim of decisions Quirinius was making in his comfortable office or, Augustus was making in his gold-inlayed palace? Decisions so they could fill their coffers with people's hard earned money?

And yet it was God who was engineering it all. And the most powerful men in the world were acting at his disposal.

You see, the gospel tells you, in its very fabric, you are not lost in a sea of chance. You are not being blown about by the senseless forces of fate, or even the plans of others who mean to do you ill. They're not the ones writing your story. It's not even you who is writing your story. Over it all, is the One great author, who first wrote Mary and Joseph, and now you into the greatest of stories, The hero of which is His Son.

And you can trust him. Because, thirdly…

Christianity is Miraculous in its Birth

You could read Luke here and think Christmas, and with it Christianity, is about government appointments, and geographical maps, and financial spreadsheets, and maternal birth plans. And it's origins are functional and organisational.

But then look how Luke describes Mary: v4-5, 'And Joseph also went up from Galilee… to be registered with Mary, *his betrothed*, who was with child.'

And while being betrothed back then was not strictly the same as being engaged today, the idea is close enough. And while today falling pregnant outside of marriage has lost much of its social stigma, back then that was most certainly not the case. Worse still, at least to an outsider looking on,

Joseph is not the father. It's what lies behind some of the insults we've seen thrown at Jesus as we've been looking at John's gospel, as his opponents fire back at him, "we were not born of sexual immorality" (John 9:41) - implication being 'but you were.'

Except Luke's already made spelled out what the Creed says so clearly, that Jesus 'was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of *the virgin* Mary.'

And so as you see the story line of the Bible unfold, and watch as God chooses first an infertile couple - Abraham and Sarah, and then an unloved wife, Leah, and then a foreign outcast woman, Ruth, to carry the seed of his Son, and as you see that line culminate in Mary, you know God is working to character, as he picks the ones no one else would ever pick.

And the greatest miracle of all takes place in the darkness of a virgin's womb as the Son of God takes on human flesh. Fully God and fully man.

And so if you know that this material, physical world is real, and your flesh and bones are real, and biology is real, and not a social construct, or something to be shrugged off, and yet you *also* know, deep down, that there *is* something more than this, that there is another world, something above and beyond you, but you wonder how to put it all together, the physical and the spiritual, then look at Christ, God becoming flesh, and know, you're not crazy. And that the answer is found in him.

So, fourthly,

Christianity is Profoundly Humbling
Think again about what's happening here. Verses 6-7, 'And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths.'

And 'firstborn son' could mean just that, couldn't it? Jesus was Mary's firstborn son. And after him, Mark tells us, came his brothers, 'James and Joses and Judas and Simon' (Mk 6:3). Except, in the Bible, 'firstborn' has overtones of something much greater. And speaking of the greater son of David promised by God, Psalm 89:27 says, 'And I will make *him* the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.' A king greater than Augustus. A king who won't just inherit his father's throne, but his Father's world.

But now look at him wrapped in swaddling cloths, a baby like any baby. And then listen as God questions Job, 'Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made clouds its garments and thick darkness its swaddling band.' (Job 38:8-9). In other words, Job, I am the God to whom the vast oceans are but a baby to be wrapped in swaddling cloths and held in my hand. And yet, that God humbles himself as a baby to be wrapped and held.

And think where this is happening. Because you'd be forgiven for reading 'the city of David' in v4 and thinking *Jerusalem!* The city of David in all his might as king, the city of David where he united and established a kingdom. The city of David were he ruled in glory. Except, it's not Jerusalem, it's Bethlehem. The village of David's childhood not the city of his adulthood. The village where he was ignored and mocked by his brothers, and treated as a no-body, where even his dad forgot he existed, not the city where he was praised as a king. The village of David the shepherd, not the city of David the Sovereign. And yet it's in *that* village, *that* city of David, that the greatest of all kings is born.

And think how it happens. Verse 7, ‘And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths *and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.’* Compare that to how Caesar Augustus was sleeping that night, and the bed he was lying in, as the Son of God is wrapped and laid in an animals’ feeding trough.

And why is he there? ‘Because there was no place for them in the inn.’

And yet, that isn’t the lowest Jesus will go, is it? Because there’s another time, 30 years later when Jesus will again be shut out - not of Bethlehem’s inn, but Jerusalem itself, as he is crucified outside the city walls. And his body will again be wrapped in cloths and laid, not in a manger, but a tomb.

And why does that happen? Why does God humble himself this way?

Well, he was given no room that room might be made for you. He was turned away that you might be welcomed in. The door was shut on him that it might be opened for you. And the king was sent to the stable that you might dine at his table.

And he came low that you might be lifted high. And on the door of his inn he hangs out the sign, ‘Room - there is room in my inn for you.’ So come all who are thirsty. Come all you who are weary. Come all you who have nothing. Come, eat and drink and rest.

In his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller writes, “If each spouse says to the other, ‘I will treat my selfishness as the main problem in our marriage,’ you have the prospect of a really great marriage.” He’s spot on, isn’t he. But selfishness isn’t just the main problem in marriage, it’s the main problem in life, the universe, and everything.

But what’s the solution to it? What can turn us away from our self-centredness and all the damage it does, and yet, at the same time, give us great assurance? Well, Christianity isn’t just historical, or rooted, or miraculous, it’s also deeply humbling. And this Christmas, as you see Jesus coming to the cradle, and then the cross; as you see him humbling himself for you, to save you, it will humble you. It will first expose but then transform your selfishness, as his grace to you changes your heart.

And as it does, it will lift you up. As it tells you, the king of Kings has come for me, and he has room for me. Even me.