

Dear Friends,

Luke 2: 1-7

It begins with a message. The message is a decree from the Emperor in Rome. What more important person could there be than the Emperor? What more important place could there be than Rome? The decree is an instruction for "all the world", that is, all those within the Roman Empire. The command is that every person should return to their own town to get registered. This is probably bad news. Most likely, the Emperor wants to know what he can take from people. How much money can he take in taxes? Who is available for him to take into his army?

The message gets people moving. They get up and go forth. They go and get registered. And amongst those who get moving are Mary and Joseph. They are two unimportant people from Nazareth, a town that nobody much cared about. They get up and go forth to Bethlehem. While they are there, Mary gives birth to a baby and lays him in a manger.

And maybe what Mary and Joseph do is a little picture of what Mary's child Jesus is also doing. Mary and Joseph register and enrol themselves in Bethlehem. While Jesus is enrolling himself on earth, amongst ordinary human beings.

Notice that Jesus does not enrol himself in the seats of the powerful, the wealthy or the admired. He does not enrol himself in Rome, the centre of political power. He does not enrol himself in Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish religion. He chooses to enrol himself in Bethlehem. We have heard that Bethlehem was just settlement, a small cluster of houses. It's not likely that it was big enough to have an inn for travellers. The idea of there being several all full to the brim with guests is our later addition to the story. It does say, "There was no place for them in the inn". But the word "inn" can also be translated "guest room" and that makes more sense.

The baby is laid in a manger which was a feeding trough for the animals with whom people often shared their living space. It was normal for a baby to be put in a manger where they would be safe from the hooves of these animals. The tradition has grown up that the birth took place in a stable. That's possible. There are however also many natural caves around Bethlehem where shepherds and travellers found shelter. We could also imagine one of these caves as the place where Jesus was born.

So, Jesus enrolls himself in this tiny settlement of simple, humble houses. He enrolls himself in a cave or a stable. He enrolls himself in a manger. In doing this, Jesus shares the experience of the ordinary people of the time. He comes to be with them and make his home amongst them.

And he takes it even further. He teaches us that he is not only to be found with and alongside people, but he is also to be found in people. He teaches that whatever you do to those who are most in need, you do to him. When you feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit those who are

sick or in prison, when you do these kinds of things, you do them to Jesus. Jesus enrolls himself in those who cry out for justice.

And in case we forget who the one who enrolled himself amongst us is, we are given some reminders. The Bible teaches us that Jesus was in very nature God, but he emptied himself and was found in human form. It also teaches this, "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God And the Word became flesh and lived among us".

It is this Jesus, the Eternal Word, who enrolls himself in the lives, experiences and needs of ordinary people, of people just like you.

God bless you,

Tony