

# *What's With the Charity?*

## Luke 2:1-7

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 17, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



<sup>1</sup> In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7, NRSV)



Jesus comes into this world as King. This is the event for which we wait with great expectation. It should be the focus of our minds and hearts this Advent season and beyond. Advent means “coming”, and we wait for Christ to come as King, to usher in his kingdom, heaven descending from earth, so that all things will be set right again once and for all. The book of Revelation uses vivid imagery to help us imagine this day. John writes,

**Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and wages war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems [crowns], and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself.<sup>1</sup>**

The passage goes on to declare that Christ is not just a king, but “**King of kings and Lord of lords.**”<sup>2</sup> Jesus himself taught us that we should always be on alert for this day to come, anticipating its arrival so that we will not be caught unprepared. There is, of course, much that is mysterious about this day, including its timing. Still, scripture is clear about one thing, that it will be glorious, that *Christ the King* will be glorious!

In a recent podcast, Scottish theologian Sinclair Ferguson makes clear that this coming glory of Christ is expressed by three New Testament words. It will be an *apocalypse*, a word that simply means “unveiling”. As we speak, Jesus is now glorified at the right hand of his Father. But we cannot yet see that scene. On that day, however, the veil will be removed, and as we see Christ as he truly is we will gasp with wonder. Words will fail us in that moment. It will also be an *epiphany*, a word that simply means “appearance”. Revelation 1:7 declares, “**Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him!**” Not only we will all see Christ in his kingly glory, every one of us will know exactly who he is. Finally, it will be a *parousia*, a word that was associated with the coming of a king into his kingdom or a general returning in triumph after victory on the battlefield. In other words, on that day there will be nothing left in creation which opposes the rule and reign of King Jesus. This future day, this coming of Jesus as King of Kings, will be the single greatest moment in the history of the whole cosmos.<sup>3</sup> The Bible ends with a prayer that this day would arrive quickly: “**Come, Lord Jesus!**”<sup>4</sup>

Let me remind you that this will not be the only time that Jesus comes to earth as King. At Advent we look forward to his *future* coming. In a week, when the Christmas season begins, we will celebrate the first time he came as king. That first arrival, as we know, looked nothing like what we anticipate the second arrival will look like. Instead of coming in glory, when Jesus arrived in Bethlehem he set aside his glory. As Paul writes in Philippians 2, Jesus, “**though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself [set aside his glory], taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness.**”<sup>5</sup> As we confessed earlier in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “Christ, the Son of God, became man, by taking to himself a true body and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin.”

God became human. The divine and eternal Son of God became a Jew, a man, a helpless human baby. There is

<sup>1</sup> Revelation 19:11-12. Unless otherwise noted, this and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 19:16

<sup>3</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Things Unseen*, “Our Lord, Come”, December 7, 2023. Listen at <https://www.ligonier.org/podcasts/things-unseen-with-sinclair-ferguson/our-lord-come>

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 22:20

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:6-7

no illusion or deception in this. Jesus didn't just put on a temporary human costume; he took on human flesh, and not just for a limited time, but for all time. The more you think about this, the more staggering it is. Theologian J.I. Packer declares that there is nothing in fiction so fantastic as the truth of the incarnation. It's a marvel of nature, yes, but more than that it is a wonder of grace, that our Creator would stoop so low into his creation to become part of creation. This is the Son of God voluntarily laying aside glory, restraining power, accepting hardship, isolation, ill-treatment, malice, misunderstanding, and ultimately the agony of a suffering death.<sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis describes the incarnation, what we call the Son of God becoming human, this way:

[The Son of God takes] all the creaturely predicament into His own being so that 'He came down from Heaven' can almost be transposed into 'Heaven drew earth up into it,' and locality, limitation, sleep, sweat, footsore weariness, frustration, pain, doubt, and death, are, from before all worlds, known by God from within.<sup>7</sup>

The Gospel accounts, including the portion of Luke we read earlier, highlight this "creaturely predicament" Lewis speaks about. To begin with, Jesus was born into extremely humble circumstances. Luke tells us that when Mary went into labor the only place where she and Joseph could find to lay the baby when he was born was a manger, a feeding trough used for stable animals like cattle, sheep and goats.

In the translation we read, we are told that there was no room for them in the inn. As a result, down through history the poor innkeeper has been thoroughly maligned for the lack of hospitality he shows to the Son of God. But that translation is misleading. Literally the word in the Greek refers to a guest room.<sup>8</sup> Joseph and Mary had roots in Bethlehem, and therefore most certainly relatives. Middle Eastern hospitality would have dictated that they not be turned away, especially in their condition. Most first-century Palestinian homes had three separate spaces, the main living space, a guest room, and then a stable which was connected to the main structure and divided off from the living space by a half-wall so that the family could feed the animals without going outside. It also ensured that the animals could be protected from thieves and predators during the night. Homes like this are still common across the world in places like Africa I have been in many homes like this. So what's happening here is that Mary and

Joseph were likely welcomed by family into a home where the guest room was already occupied because of the census. So they ended up in the stable, first giving birth, and then trying to sleep with their newborn baby right in amongst the animals.<sup>9</sup>

Luke presents this space as simple and bare. Ever since we have done our best to spruce up the scene with soft glowing light, adoring animals, noble kings bearing treasure, even angels fluttering about. But the text begs us not to do this. There is no ambient light, especially emanating from the make-shift crib. It was likely dark. There are no kings present. The fortune tellers, which is what they actually were, came much later. The angels aren't there, but out in the fields with the shepherds. And the sheep aren't smiling and bleating gentle lullabies, but probably just stinking up the joint.

Is this a fitting birthplace for a king? Here's a photo of England's King Charles just after he was born in 1948. That's more like it! Make no mistake, Jesus could have chosen to have been born in such circumstances, in a lavish palace, to rich and powerful parents, surrounded by servants instead of goats, in a cradle of gold rather than a feeding trough still stinking of slop. He did not make that choice. Glory which rightly belonged to him was set aside, and set aside completely.

And things don't change after his birth. Eight days later Joseph and Mary take their newborn son to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate him to the Lord, as was the expectation for all firstborn males in Jewish society. A sacrifice was required at this time. The Law of Moses dictated that the family would bring a young lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or a turtledove for a purification offering. However, in special hardship cases, and only in those cases when the family could never afford a lamb, they could instead bring two turtledoves or two pigeons.<sup>10</sup> Luke tells us that this is exactly what Mary and Joseph did.<sup>11</sup> Jesus was born into a peasant family, into the lower economic class in Palestine.

And then when Mary and Joseph eventually decide to settle down as a family, they choose Nazareth, a small village in Galilee that was so insignificant in those days that it was never even mentioned once in the Old Testament. Later on when Philip goes to tell his friend Nathanael that he has found the Messiah, and that he is Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth, Nathanael is

<sup>6</sup> J.I. Packer, *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*, edited by Nancy Guthrie (Crossway Books, 2008), 69-70.

<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963), 70-71.

<sup>8</sup> <https://studybible.info/strongs/G2646> We see the Greek properly translated to "inn" in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:34 when the Samaritan takes the injured Jew to an inn. That is a different

word than Luke uses here in the Christmas narrative. Jim Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 72.

<sup>9</sup> Edwards, 73.

<sup>10</sup> See Leviticus 12:6-8.

<sup>11</sup> See Luke 2:22-24.

dumbfounded, “**Can anything good come out of Nazareth?**”<sup>12</sup> Apparently nobody in those days boasted that they were from Nazareth. Jesus lived most of his life in a city which, had he not lived there, would have been long forgotten by most everybody today.

The commonly used Latin phrase *Deus semper maior* translates, “God who is always greater”. It’s true, God *is* always greater. But some have pointed out that when Jesus takes on human flesh, a better description is *Deus semper minor*, which means “God is always less.”<sup>13</sup> When Jesus first comes to earth as King he behaved more lowly than anybody thought God could or should ever behave. But if we have been paying attention, we would know that this has always been God’s way.

When God chooses a people through whom he will reveal himself to the world, he doesn’t make the natural and obvious choice, the mighty Egyptians, or Romans, or Assyrians, or Babylonians. Instead God chooses the Jews, a seemingly insignificant race which is seldom in power. Goliath is dispatched by a shepherd boy instead of a great warrior. God doesn’t speak to Elijah through the earthquake, the wind, or the fire, but through a still, small voice.

In the ancient world when it was the oldest son who always received the lions share of the wealth and the favor, God chooses instead to work through younger sons like Abel, Isaac, Jacob, Ephraim, and David. At a time when women were valued for their fertility, God works through infertile women like Sarah, Leah, Rebekah, Hannah, and Elizabeth. As writer Tim Keller puts it, “Over and over again God says, ‘I will choose Nazareth, not Jerusalem. I will choose the girl nobody wants. I will choose the boy everybody has forgotten.’”<sup>14</sup> Should it surprise us that when God himself comes to earth he would behave any differently?

All this reminds us that salvation comes to and from a place of poverty. Every other religion, worldview and philosophy tells us that that salvation comes when we demonstrate we are worthy of salvation - God helps those who help themselves! But could not be further from the truth. God helps those who have come to realize that they can never help themselves. Jesus, in fact, begins his central teaching with these words, “**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**”<sup>15</sup> Luke de-spiritualizes it in his record: “**Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.**”<sup>16</sup>

The King doesn’t come, at his first visit or his second, for the capable, the self-righteous, the successful, the self-sufficient, the power brokers, the top dogs, the beautiful and the famous. Those people also are terribly impoverished as well, and the King welcomes them if they come to realize it. He welcomes *us* if we come to realize our spiritual poverty. The others among us who are under no such illusions, the incapable, unrighteous, failures, insufficient, powerless, castoffs, the ugly and the overlooked, those are the ones Jesus not only receives, but the ones Jesus came to live among. As biblical commentator Fred Craddock puts it in reference to his Christmas narrative, “Luke has kept the story [of Jesus’ birth] clean of any decoration that would remove it from the lowly, the poor, and the marginal of the earth.”<sup>17</sup>

If we are disciples of Jesus, which is what he calls us to be, it means that we are committing our entire lives to following Jesus. That’s what a disciple does, he or she follows a master, seeking to not only know what the master knows, but to *become like the master*. Among other things, this means that as Christians we must also be very committed to identifying with the poor and marginalized in this world. This is the spirit of Christ, who spent his life taking the lesser place, making himself poor, spending and being spent, enriching those around him, even those who wanted nothing to do with him, giving his time, his trouble, his care, his compassion, his forgiveness, and ultimately his life. This must also be our way.

Jesus once told a parable about religious people who choose to pass by a man in trouble on the side of the road, more concerned with their own religious practice than with the needs of the world around them. It was the hated Samaritan who we eventually call good because he does not pass by, but stops to give himself for the sake of another he does not know, even another who may have hated him under any other circumstance. Reflecting on this parable, J.I. Packer writes that as Christians our ambition in life must not be “building a nice middle-class Christian home, and making nice middle-class Christian friends, and bringing up children in nice middle-class Christian ways, and leaving the sub-middle-class sections of the community, Christian and non-Christian, to get on by themselves.”<sup>18</sup>

A rejection of this worldly ambition in favor of identification with the poor has been at the heart of faithful disciples since the beginning of the church. The early church grew up in the Roman Empire which was no welfare state. In fact, care for poor in the ancient

<sup>12</sup> John 1:46

<sup>13</sup> Fredrick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 110.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas* (Penguin Books, 2018), 75-76.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 5:3

<sup>16</sup> Luke 6:20

<sup>17</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke* (John Knox Press, 1990), 35.

<sup>18</sup> Packer 71.

West was very rare. Historian Rodney Stark points out that classical philosophy “regarded mercy and pity as pathological emotions – defects of character to be avoided by all rational men. Since mercy involves providing unearned help or relief, it was contrary to justice.”<sup>19</sup> The church turned this idea on its head. In a society where people were taught to see the poor as victims of cruel destiny, or as those who were simply getting what they deserved, followers of Jesus were taught that to look closely at a poor beggar, for example, was to see the face of God.

Many people mocked Christians for their compassion. In the end, however, it was this compassion and identification with the poor which injected remarkable growth into the church. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century a great plague claimed the lives of up to a third of all citizens in the Roman Empire. A century later, another terrible epidemic killed as many as 5000 people a day in Rome alone. Understandably, most people fled for their lives. It was the Christians who mostly stayed and nursed the sick, often at the price of their own lives. The impact of such a sacrifice was undeniable. Countless pagans, who otherwise would have continued to mock this small, emerging sect, now were eagerly attracted to a community so willing to demonstrate such sacrificial love. Rodney Stark points out that what was true then, is still true today, that unbelievers are not nearly as attracted to a creed, even a creed that declares love, as they are attracted to a community that puts that creed of love into practice.<sup>20</sup>

All this is rooted in the fact that when the Son of God came to earth as King the first time he chose to be born into a peasant family and spend his first night in a feeding trough surrounded by stable animals. And a life that began in poverty ended in poverty, not gloriously on a throne with a crown of jewels, but shamefully on a cross with a crown of thorns. Is it any wonder that at this time of year, most people, believers and unbelievers alike, are more willing to show generosity and compassion to those who have less than they need? Charles Dickens even coined the term “Scrooge” for a person who, even at Christmas, shows no regard for the poor! I don’t know if they are still around these days, but I wonder how well the Salvation Army bell ringers would do in April or September. This is the time of year to ring those bells, because there is something about Christmas that makes most people realize that they really ought to stop and put something in the bucket.

We know why that is. And so as in past weeks I’ve invited you to allow the images of lights, and table, and

gifts this season to point you to Christ and the heart of his mission in this world, can you also allow the image of the manger scene, rightly pictured, to draw you to that same place? There’s a line in Isaiah 11, a passage we often read this time of year, that always strikes me. Isaiah prophesies that the Messiah will come one day and “**with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.**”<sup>21</sup> This is always what Jesus does, he makes decisions that benefit the poor of this world. And so how might we as his followers do the same, arrange our hearts, and then our lives, so that we also might make decisions that benefit those around us in this world who do not have what they need, and not just this season, but long after the bells outside Macys have stopped ringing.

I’m sure many of you remember that Jesus told another parable one time about sheep and goats where he made the shocking point that when we serve the poor in this world we are actually serving him.<sup>22</sup> His not-so-subtle message is that when you go to serve somebody in need, you are not bringing Christ *to them* as much as you are going to meet Christ *in them*. Many of us have had this experience. This fall some of us at Faith have been spending one Saturday a month over outside Bethany Church sharing resources with some in our community who don’t have enough, some even who don’t have a place to take a shower. By far the best part of this experience for me has been the conversations I have had with some of the people who have come to be with us. In these conversations I usually realize very quickly that while God may use me to bless this person, he is also using him or her to bless me.

I’ve had similar experiences in Kenya and Ethiopia more times than I can remember. God willing, I’ll be traveling back to Kenya this spring. If any of you want to come with me for a week or so, please let me know. I’d love to take you along. You will meet Jesus in that place. As I go, I know what will happen. I will meet people who are among the poorest of the poor in this world, and yet in many of them I will meet Christ. I suppose this used to surprise me. It shouldn’t. Where else would we expect to meet Jesus? If you wanted to meet Jesus back when he was walking around Palestine, where would you go to find him? Your best chance to find him was to go looking for the poor and the outcasts. Find them and you find Jesus. Why do we think it would be any different today?

Please don’t hear me trying to glorify poverty. Jesus didn’t just meet people in those desperate places, he did what he could to lift them out of their desperation. When he comes again someday as King, this time in all

<sup>19</sup> Cited by Vincent Carroll & David Shiflett, *Christianity of Trial: Arguments Against Anti-Religious Bigotry* (Encounter Books, 2002), 142.

<sup>20</sup> Vincent Carroll & David Shiflett, 145-146.

<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 11:4, New International Version (NIV).

<sup>22</sup> See Matthew 25:31-46.

his glory, he will put an end to all such suffering and scarcity for good. In the meantime before he comes, we are called as his disciples to join him in this work and participate in the realization of this final destiny.

And so how are you and I going to make space this season and beyond to follow Jesus in this way? How can we arrange things in our lives during what we have too often made a terribly busy season, that we might make decisions for the poor of the earth, not from a place of superiority, but from a place of humility because we, too, are poor in our own ways, all of us beneficiaries of the one who made himself poor so that we might become rich. As Paul wrote in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 8:9, **“For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”** This is not for our glory, or for the glory of the ones we serve, but for the glory of our humble King who one day will come in the glory which has always been rightly his.

Amen.

*Lord God, we pray to you from the midst of our broken and desperate world knowing that we pray to one who knows the brokenness. You are our glorious King, but also our humble King, who lived and died among the poor and desperate. We know why you came, not only to restore parts of our world, but all of our world, heaven and earth...to bring heaven to earth! You are the eternal Word made flesh, our redeemer and sustainer, and we believe you are coming again. You promised us you are coming soon. We wait for you to come and set all things in all places right again.*

*Come, Lord Jesus. Come into the darkest places of our world. Break the chains of warfare, violence and terror which even today consume so many corners of our planet. We will never solve these problems on our own. The infection runs too deeply.*

*Come, Lord Jesus. Too many people in this world have too little. Bring good news to the poor as you promised you would do. Bless the poor as you promised to do. Use us, your people, to bring this blessing. As we bless, keep us open to receiving blessing as we meet you in those we serve.*

*Come, Lord Jesus. There are people all over our city have no place to live, sleep on the cold concrete, eat out of garbage cans. Each one made in very image of God – Lord, this cannot be how you made the world to be.*

*Come, Lord Jesus. You tell us that you are the one who sets leaders in place to govern the nations of this world. How few there are among them who do so with compassion, and truth, and justice. Come restore righteous rule to the nations.*

*Come, Lord Jesus. Take away the joylessness and fear that weigh so heavily on so many. You have been so good and generous with us. How can we have so much, and yet still live as if we don't have enough. Come and show us abundant life. Show us how to trust. Show us how to celebrate the ways you bless others, even when those blessings are undeserved.*

*Come, Lord Jesus. For some among us, and for many in our world, grief and sadness are too heavy to carry much longer. Some of us have lost what is most dear and the only way we know that can be restored is for you to come again. We are ready for you to come and make all things right again. We are ready to have our tears wiped away.*

*Come, Lord Jesus. Everywhere there is disease. Cancer infects so many. Pain is chronic. We watch helplessly as the memories fade in the minds of those we love. You are the great healer! We are weary of waiting. Come and heal once and for all.*

*In the meantime, Lord, we know that your grace is with us. May that be evident to the world. May we, your church, be empowered and enlivened and follow you out into the world to give ourselves for the world – help us live boldly, joyfully, dangerously even, dying to ourselves that we might be made fully alive. May the world around us be given in us a glimpse of the kingdom which is to come, the reality beneath the shadows which is inevitable. As we pray for things to be set right in this world, use us as your instruments to set things right.*

*You came once before, Word made flesh born to a woman. We now wait for you to come again, Lord Jesus. We watch and wait for you. We rejoice in you because we know in time you will do all you have promised to do. New heaven. New earth. All things new in all places. You as our God, present with your people. Every tear wiped away. Death no more. Crying and pain no more. Sin no more.*

*Come, Lord Jesus. We are awake. We believe salvation is nearer now than before. The night is almost gone. The day of salvation will soon be here. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our King, the one who makes all things new.*

Amen.

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## The Next Step

*A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Luke 2:1-7. Like most Christmas narratives from the Gospels, we are so familiar with the stories that it's hard to hear with fresh ears. Do your best.

What do you notice here that you haven't noticed before?

2. Have you ever before thought about the fact that Christ comes as King to earth twice, once at Bethlehem and once at the end of human history? How do you compare and contrast these two arrivals?
3. Why are we always doing our best to spruce up the manger scene in ways that ignore the testimony of Luke that it was simple, humble, and bare? In fact, it's nearly impossible these days to find a nativity scene that accurately reflects Luke's description. What's going on here?
4. It betrays conventional wisdom to think that the best way to influence the world is to come into the world without power, influence or wealth, to come as one of the poorest of the poor and remain that way. Why would Jesus choose this path?
5. Do you consider yourself poor or rich? How do we define these categories?
6. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 8:9 Paul declares, **“For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”** What does he mean by this?
7. What is your relationship to the poor of this world right now? How might Christ be challenging you to change that relationship?
8. According to the prophet Isaiah, Christ “gives decisions for the poor of the earth” (Isaiah 11:4). How are you (or can you) make decisions that benefit the poor of the earth this Christmas season?

**Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.**



*Why did God come to earth and choose a life of poverty? What does this teach us about how we should live our lives?*