

The birth of God's only Son! Just think how this would have been planned today! Think of all the publicity. And then, when the event actually took place and the child was born... the reporters... news coverage all over the world... make up for the Virgin Mary and Joseph so they don't look pale on color television... cute close-ups of the baby Jesus on the cover of the Ladies Home Journal. Microphones pressed into the faces of the Shepherds.

But God's ways are not our ways. Although this was God entering his own world, he enjoyed no special privilege or protection. As the hymn says, "With the poor and mean and lowly, lived on earth our Saviour Holy."

Now it seems to me that the world in which we live today teaches us to worship above all things success, wealth, glamour, and power. But all of these things are absent in Bethlehem. When we listen to the words of our Scripture Lesson with our minds and imaginations uncluttered by the accumulated debris of Christmas customs we discover that the first Christmas was squalid if not down right tacky. Imagine, in your mind's eye, the scene which we heard described in the Gospel according to St. Luke. There are shepherds, there <sup>Q1c</sup> Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus. Let's take a closer look at each of these characters.

First, the shepherds. Most Jews regarded shepherds as thieves. People were forbidden to buy wool or milk from shepherds on the assumption that it was stolen property. They were considered liars. They could not testify in a court of law because they were considered untrustworthy. The rabbis despised shepherds because they were not religious men. Their jobs kept them out in the fields so they weren't able to worship in the synagogue or study the Bible or observe the religious laws and customs of the Jews. They were sinners in the eyes of their neighbors. They were not religious men who first came to Jesus and believed and rejoiced in the birth of their Saviour.

Now turn your attention to Joseph. In the eyes of most of his neighbors Joseph was a fool. Only a fool would marry a girl who was pregnant with somebody else's baby. Only a fool could believe his wife is still a virgin after having given birth to a son. In the eyes of his neighbors, therefore, Joseph is a fool.

Next we turn to Mary. She is perhaps as young as thirteen or fourteen years old; certainly no older than eighteen or nineteen. A Jewish girl could become betrothed as early as twelve years of age. She had been married for only a couple months and already she has a baby. Her neighbors

back in Nazareth shake their heads in disgust and complain about the decline in sexual morality. In the eyes of her neighbors Mary is the kind of girl you don't want your daughter to be like.

Finally, we turn our eyes to the baby in the manger.

He is crying, eyes shut, sticky with birth. In the eyes of the world he is a child of fornication as his enemies later were to charge. According to Luke the child lied in a manger; in a place built only for animals. The manger sets the stage for the life of Jesus who as a man said he had no ~~where~~ where to lay his head. As we look at this baby lying in the squalor of a manger, surrounded by the odors of a stable, it's hard to believe he is the Son of God. It's hard to believe that the salvation of the world hangs on such a slender thread as the feeble throb of a baby's heart.

In the eyes of the world this baby, born under these circumstances, will go no place in the world. Children from this kind of a background ~~grow~~ grow up and get in trouble. Jesus was no different. Listen to some of the actual things the Bible says his neighbors whispered about him when he grew up: He eats and drinks with sinners. He is a glutton. He is a drunkard. This man is not from God because he does not keep the Sabbath. We know that this man is a sinner. If

this man were a prophet he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.

Listen, he blasphemes God. He is in league with Satan.

So you see, men born as Jesus was often get bad reputations. Babies who are born out in the barn to teen-age girls often end their lives on the short side of the law. The end of Jesus' life ran true to form. He was arrested as a criminal. Listen again to some of the actual charges that were brought against him: We heard him say, I will destroy this temple. We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes. He stirs up the people. He incites the people to rebellion. He deserves to die.

So this baby, born in a stable, under such shady circumstances died as we might expect, as a criminal, executed with a thief and a murderer. And so the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled, "He was despised and rejected by men. And they made his grave with the wicked."

So you see, the birth of Jesus set the stage for his entire life. The Christmas story is a squalid story. It's a tacky story. Yet if we are to know Jesus, not as a myth, not as a pious legend, not as portrayed by Madison Avenue, not as a syrupy sentimental Hollywood Jesus; but if we are to know him as he is pictured in the Bible, we must go

first to the stable to see what he was like.

Jesus is found today as he was then, among the weak and lowly and despised. He is found among the outcasts and misfits of society. If you can't see Jesus among those whom the world considers foolish, weak, low, and despised; whom the world considers as nothings; you will never see Jesus even in the most beautiful church during the most beautiful <sup>church</sup> ~~Christmas-Eve~~ service. The world judged Jesus as a sinner. But through the gift of faith we see that Jesus is the source of our very life. He is our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, and our freedom.

[The story of Jesus also tells us that things are not always as they appear to be. What appears to be religious in the eyes of the world, God considers worthless. What appears sinful and despised in the eyes of the world, God declares righteous and good. What appears tacky, squalid, and seamy in the eyes of the World, God considers holy.]

I hope this Christmas you will discover the revolutionary Christmas truth which turns upside down the world's values. As Paul said, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." Merry Christmas AMEN