

## ***Sermon in Jabavu on November 26th, 2006 Luke 2, 1-20***

Dear Brothers and Sisters, dear grandparents here in Jabavu,

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to be here with you today and to share such an essential part of the Scriptures with you. I want to share some thoughts with you concerning the things that are happening around the birth of Jesus. Two weeks ago our daughter had her first day in the new nursery school. The teacher asked the children: "What is Christmas all about?" The children had a lot of answers: "It's about presents. On Christmas we have loads of good food and we sing Christmas carols. Father Christmas comes and brings us presents. Christmas is about the white glittering stuff that you put on the Christmas tree." So I have already found out that in this country people have lots of different ideas about Christmas. In Europe Christmas is in winter. And we often have snow in winter. And so a lot of people in Europe feel that there is no real Christmas without snow. Isn't that strange?

Some years ago I used to live in Israel for some months and I also celebrated Christmas there, only a few kilometres away from Bethlehem, where the real Christmas had happened. And that was when I got aware that most probably there was no snow around the birth of Jesus. That Jesus and his parents most probably suffered from a lot of things – but definitely not from the cold and the snow. They don't have snow in Bethlehem. Now I know it. Well, maybe you have always known that Christmas has nothing to do with

snow. Or that it is not about Father Christmas. But what idea do we have about the birth of Jesus?

A German writer has first written a famous Christmas carol which is now sung in many languages worldwide: Silent night, holy night. I think this song summarizes very clearly what idea not only Germans but also many people all over the world have about Christmas: We see the holy family sitting in a tidy, well-cleaned stable filled with soft and fluffy hay and straw. Mary is smiling happily; Baby Jesus is lying in the manger and sleeping peacefully. But if we take the Scriptures serious and if we research in the Gospel according to Luke and in the one according to Matthew we do not find such romantic ideas about the event of Jesus' birth.

If we read the Gospel without the pictures of peaceful Christmas cards in our minds we will find a story of two vulnerable teenage parents from the rural areas. We find the story of a teenager named Joseph who finds his fiancée Mary being pregnant. What an incredible shame it was in these times to be pregnant without being married. And it was not only a matter of shame - the Jewish laws claim young pregnant single women to be stoned! She was in real danger! In the Gospel according to Matthew we find the story of a decent young man who considers leaving his fiancée quietly not to disgrace her publicly. God is laying the life of his Son into the hands of two teenagers. Isn't that enough of a scandal?

By the way – the Bible does not tell us anything about the grandparents of Jesus: Did they believe the story Mary and Joseph

told them about the pregnancy of Mary? Did they support them in their tricky situation or did they break up with them considering them undignified persons? I want us all at least to try to understand the situation of the Virgin Mary seeing an angel and being told that she will soon receive a baby. In her situation this was more a shock than good news. And it probably was a heavy step to say: “I am the Lord’s servant and I am willing to do whatever he wants.” And most probably she did not know yet how hard this demand was to fulfil. She didn’t know yet that she would have to travel a few days before giving birth to the baby. She did not know yet that she would give birth to her baby in a dirty and smelling stable far away from home with no mother or grandmother available to support her. And be honest – have you ever seen a stable which you would describe as peaceful, clean and inviting? Mary did not know yet about being a refugee family a short time after the birth of the baby; about being on the run in a foreign country.

The scenario that we find in the Bible about the beginning of the life of God’s Son on the earth can easily be called a catastrophe. It could not have been more demanding to both the father and the mother; it could hardly have been more humiliating, more underprivileged, and more adventurous. If we see Christmas the way the Gospel describes it we can learn three points from it:

1. Living according to God’s plan does not always mean to feel comfortable.

Usually we have the idea that when we do whatever God wants us to do we will live a comfortable life with a lot of blessings. And if we

think about blessings, what comes to our mind? We think of health, of safety and prosperity. But Mary's story draws a different picture: There is no doctor dropping by right behind the angel to offer his or her help during pregnancy. What did Mary feel when she heard that they would have to walk 120 km from Nazareth to Bethlehem a few days before the expected birth of the baby? Did she blame God for letting her suffer? Did she doubt that he was still on her side? I can imagine she did. Was she smiling calmly when they did not find a shelter in Bethlehem? Or was she desperately hoping to wake up from that nightmare?

And it is not only Mary. In the New Testament and especially in the environment of Jesus we find a lot of people who had to suffer and who had to go through a lot of pain although or even because they lived according to the will of God. John the Baptist and Paul are only two examples. There is no doubt that we are blessed when we live according to the will of God. A few days after the appearance of the angel Mary goes and visits Elizabeth. And there she starts to rejoice and to understand the never-ending mercy of God that will soon be revealed related to the birth of her son. This is the kind of blessing that we receive when we live according to the will of God: We experience that God is near, that God is merciful. We feel his love and care. But we must not believe that we just have to live within the will of God and there will be no more trouble in our life. Or to see it the other way round: We can't judge if other people live according to God's will by judging their life circumstances.

The second thing we can learn from the Christmas story is:

2. Gods revelation through his Son starts and ends with people we consider undignified.

How could that ever happen? How could God lay the life of his Son into the hands of two teenagers? Wasn't he able to provide a better start for the Prince of Peace? How could shabby and uneducated shepherds be the first ones to hear of the birth of Jesus? How could God not provide an adequate setting for the birth like in a palace or at least in the house of any rich person? Was it by accident? Was it a result of poor planning? No, it was not. Every single detail happened by purpose. God wanted it the way it happened. God sent his Son to explain us in an understandable way how he is. Jesus includes all the characteristics God wants us to know about Him. "When you see me, you are seeing the one who sent me" is what Jesus says later on in John 12:45.

But what exactly does the birth of Jesus reveal about God's character? From the very beginning on He does not spare any pains to show men that Jesus wants to save each and everyone. No one is excluded. He does not prefer elderly people to teenagers, nor professors to domestic workers, nor white people to black people, nor men to women. He wants to be close to us, he wants to save every single person.

And would we have understood this if Jesus had been born as the son of a king? If he had lived a wealthy life in a palace set apart from the rest of the people? When we started to make plans for our time in South Africa our employer, the European Baptist Mission,

explained us right at the beginning: You will not be able to live in township. You can neither live in Yeoville near the office nor in Soweto where most of the churches are. It is too dangerous for you as white people. We cannot take the responsibility for your risk. So you can blame us for never really knowing what it is like to live in a township. And you are right. We have heard a lot about it, we have read a lot about it. We come here and visit churches; we visit the HIV/AIDS projects. But it makes a difference if you see things from time to time as a visitor or if you really live it and if you become a part of it.

But Jesus did not maintain the difference between him and simple men. He did not only drop in for a short visit. For him it was worth leaving all his privileges behind to become a part of the ordinary people. He gave up everything to show his love for every single man and woman regardless of their origin, bank account, profession, type of car or the size of the house. He invested everything to make clear how much he loves every single person on this earth. And this is the 3<sup>rd</sup> thing I want to emphasize concerning the biblical Christmas story:

### 3. God reveals himself in an undignified way

Beyond the people he was involved with he himself gave up his dignity. He did not cling to any symbols of prestige. He obviously did not consider it necessary to impress the political or religious leaders. Even later on Jesus never cared about what other people thought about him. He gave up everything to be part of the

underprivileged. He humbled himself to show everyone his never-ending love.

If we read and tell the Christmas story like a Cinderella fairytale, if we pretend it is the wonderful easygoing story of the triumphant arrival of Jesus on earth, we fail to see the real meaning of it. We deny how much it cost Jesus to be born, to live and to die in such a humiliating way. Then we miss to understand what he wants to show us in the Christmas story: how much he really loves us.

At the beginning I mentioned the children's answers to the question: "What is Christmas all about?" One boy answered: "**On Christmas God showed us how to make a good present.**" The two teachers and I laughed about it. But finally I think this is the truth: The life of Jesus on earth is the best-planned and most valuable present that we will ever be given. Let us use these weeks before Christmas to read the story again in the Scriptures, to understand it in a new way. Let's give God the chance to come as close to us as he wants. Let us give Him the chance to make his love understandable for each of us. Do not reject the best and most loving present you have ever been given. AMEN.