

The Foolishness of Christmas

by Rev. Robert Griffith

An eight year old girl once wrote to Abraham Lincoln, suggesting that he grow a beard. In her opinion, Lincoln would appeal to more voters if he would hide his homely face. Rather than being offended, Lincoln answered her letter personally and thanked her for her suggestion. He further added that his campaign would be coming in her vicinity soon and he would like to meet her to express his appreciation.

Well apparently the letter from Lincoln spurred a flurry of activity in the girl's town. Her father was a member of the local Republican party. The officials of the party were ecstatic at the prospect of a visit from Lincoln. They saw visions of political prestige, special favours, positions in Washington, perhaps even a cabinet post. Introductions were prepared, speeches written, a band rehearsed.

On the day that Lincoln's campaign train was scheduled to pass through, practically the whole town was assembled at the rail station. There were the leading Republicans wearing their top hats, the shiny marching band, the townsfolk in their finest clothes. Almost everyone was there, that is, except the little girl to whom Lincoln had written. She had been left at home. After all, her father reasoned, Lincoln would be interested only in the politicians and their speeches, and the voters and their votes, not the attentions of an insignificant little girl.

As the campaign train approached the town, however, it was forced to stop for repairs. Lincoln, not wanting to sit in the hot train, set out across the fields on foot. Walking through the streets of the empty town, he found the little girl's house. When he introduced himself at the door, the maid was speechless. But the little girl and her playmate, the maid's daughter, welcomed him in as if they were expecting him.

The two girls had been having a pretend party, drinking pretend hot chocolate out of small teacups. They invited Mr. Lincoln to join them and went through the motions of pouring him a cup. There in the parlour Lincoln sat with the two little girls, engaging in small talk and sipping pretend hot chocolate with them. After a while, Lincoln said he must be going, thanked them for the party, and asked them how they liked his new beard. They were very impressed. Then he walked to the waiting train.

The final part of the story is the best. Lincoln's campaign train went right through the town without stopping! It went right past all the waiting politicians and local dignitaries; right past the loud-playing band and the flag-draped platform; right past the ladies and gentlemen in their Sunday best. Lincoln had just come to visit and say thank-you to an eight-year-old girl.

That story so reminds me of Christmas. The world in the time of Christ's birth was focused on the empire and politics of Caesar Augustus. The Roman Empire stretched its real estate to maximum proportions. Its western boundary was the Atlantic Ocean. Its eastern boundary was the Euphrates. It reached north to the Danube and the Rhine and south to the Sahara Desert. Practically no one was looking when God sent His Son to be born in a common stable in a tiny, insignificant town called Bethlehem. If God was trying to impress anyone or get their attention, He sure did a poor job!

But once we understand this God, Whom we worship and to Whom we owe our existence and our salvation, we realise that this is just like Him - to use things that seem terribly insignificant to put to shame the things that seem highly important to those who believe they are powerful and significant.

1 Corinthians 1:27-29 expresses this very clearly:

"...but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God."

Most of the world on the night Jesus was born was distracted by more 'important' things. Caesar was getting ready to levy a tax on the Empire. Lesser rulers struggled to stay in power. Power brokers everywhere were struggling to move up or keep what they had. Had they known of Jesus' birth, they would have dismissed it as insignificant, and foolish to think it had any meaning for them or the world in which they lived.

There is so much about the Birth of Christ that seems foolish in the eyes of the unenlightened world and, in fact, there is so much about the birth, life, death and ministry of this Christ which seems foolish to those who look down upon others from their places of self-declared importance. Such people always overlook Christ, then and now. Don't let that upset you. God actually designed it that way. Understand this and you will be blessed.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas once again, I want us to consider the 'foolishness' (as man sees it) of the whole story of Christ's birth.

The birth city was foolish ...

Most of the world knows that Bethlehem was the birthplace of Jesus. Because of the Christmas story, Bethlehem is famous now. But on that cold night when Christ was born, that was definitely not the case. The Hebrew word *Beth-le-hem* means 'house of bread' and in the time of Christ, Bethlehem was as insignificant as a tiny loaf of bread. The prophet, Micah, predicted the birthplace eight centuries before Jesus was born.

We read in Micah 5:2, *"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity."*

We sing, *O Little Town of Bethlehem* every year and believe me, it was indeed little and insignificant. In fact, Bethlehem seemed so insignificant that for centuries scholars questioned the writings of Micah. How could it be that Bethlehem, the tiny 'house of bread,' insignificant as a grain of wheat, would be the birthplace of the Son of God?

At the very least Jerusalem, just five miles north of Bethlehem, would seem to be a much better place to choose as the birth city. Not only was it the hub of Judaism, it was a big city in its day. Accommodations were far better. During Passover, Jerusalem swelled by hundreds of thousands of people. Perhaps even better than Jerusalem would have been Rome. It was *the centre* of power and influence. But that's not the way God did it – and it seldom is. He chooses the *"foolish things of the world to shame the wise."* We see it in the choice of the birth city.

The choice of the birth city was certainly a case of *"...the weak things of the world"* being used *"to shame the things which are strong..."*

The choice of birth parents was foolish ...

The story of Mary and Joseph becoming the parents of the Saviour of the world is the most incredulous, but wonderful story in all of humanity. No matter what description you consider, these two, the earthly parents of Jesus, were simple, humble, country folk. Had both of them been killed by robbers that night, the world would not have known or cared. They were 'nobodies.' Wouldn't it have been better to have the Son of God born in the home of the Emperor or some celebrity so the whole world would know quickly and people would be drawn to his fame and importance? That's how most of us might have planned it, but that's not God's way and to the world it looked foolish in the extreme to choose Mary and Joseph.

Perhaps the most foolish aspect of this choice was also the most controversial. Mary and Joseph were not even married. Shock, horror! Talk about foolish? If you want people to believe this baby is God, the Saviour of the world, the long awaited Messiah, then bringing Him into the world in the most controversial circumstances, triggering a moral scandal – seems really dumb (to us).

The birth place was foolish ...

The accommodations in Bethlehem were probably not the best on a normal day. Given the circumstances of a sudden influx of so many people because of the census, you can imagine the problems. In a short time the place was packed to overflowing. Mary and Joseph arrived too late to get a civilized place to spend the night. No one left the light on that night for the birth-parents of the Son of God. Historians tell us that it was possible that the travellers slept all over the streets during this heavy taxation time.

Nobody cared about the birth of a baby that night. The whole talk of the city would have been the problem of taxation and Caesar and Quirinius and Herod - the ones who ordered this pandemonium. The crying of that little infant would only be another irritant in the ears of people wanting sleep. Nobody cared, and there was no room. So they finally found shelter in a cave, a stable. That's where this baby was born. Makeshift clothes. Makeshift bassinet (an animal feeding trough). What a place for a king to be born! What a place for God's Son to be born! Many of you may have taken your children or your friends to the place of your birth and proudly told them, "That's where I was born." Now imagine Jesus, in his adult life, returning to Bethlehem, finding that stable (if it still existed) and saying to those with him, "That's where I was born." Do you get it? "*...the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen...*"

It sure was a humble birth! But it's still the most important event in human history! And the world needed to know what had happened. There needed to be some kind of announcement, otherwise, how was anyone going to know? Yet, there was even "foolishness" in that.

The birth announcement was foolish ..

Surely you've received birth announcements. Perhaps there was a call from the excited father or the new grandparents. A week or two later you got the card in the mail - all pretty and coloured with gold inlaid edges. Maybe a picture. "Announcing..." and then the name of the baby. But the way God handled the birth announcement of His Son was very different. He didn't wake Quirinius or Herod or Augustus. They didn't get a card in the mail. Instead He sent His angels to wake some dozing, dirty shepherds in a paddock somewhere! I think it's most likely that the shepherds mentioned here were watching over a very special flock of sheep that night near Bethlehem. I'm referring to the temple flock, that special flock of consecrated, blemish-free animals kept for the purpose of sacrifice in the nearby temple in Jerusalem. These were "slaughter sheep." Every one of them in the flock was destined for the altar to die in atonement for the sins of the men and women they represented.

When you consider the ultimate purpose of Jesus' birth, there could be no more appropriate group to announce to. You see, a lamb was born that night, a tiny lamb who lay in a manger, destined for Calvary's altar. John the Baptist later said of Him, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*"

So in the account of His birth, we find an allusion to His death! This, too, is in keeping with that part of the nature of God that uses "*the base things of the world and the despised*" to nullify the pride and arrogance of man. Those who are immersed in power and prestige and their own self-interest want nothing to do with talk of death. That's because death is the ultimate thief that steals away what they live for! But to those willing to listen to the intentionally common and obscure message of God, this reference to Christ's death has real meaning!

It was customary in that place and time when a boy was born, for the local musicians to congregate at the house of his birth to greet him with music. With Jesus born in a stable in a town where no one knew his parents, this could not happen. So God replaced the musicians of earth with musicians from heaven and the angels sang at Jesus' birth.

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Things haven't changed much, have they? People still give place to the 'significant' things (money, political power, prestige, popularity). They overlook and even shun the simple. In so doing, they miss God, because He will not allow the arrogant to approach Him.

Perhaps we've seen that just a little better here. Caesar wasn't invited to the birth of Jesus. Neither were any of the others who made up the 'who's who' of the ancient world. That's the way it is with God.

"For consider your calling brothers and sisters," writes Paul, some years later, *"that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble..."* among you.

Does that bother you? Apparently it doesn't bother God. Not in the least. Jesus came to call those who are humble enough to listen - people wise enough to see significance in the midst of the insignificant.

You could not find a more humble beginning for any human life than that of Jesus of Nazareth ... and the 'foolishness' of the Christmas story is actually the central truth we all must understand: God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humility is the key that unlocks the door of God's grace, God's empowering presence.

God entered our world in humility and we enter God's world exactly the same way. The Christmas story is foolishness to the proud and self-sufficient. It's the greatest and most life-changing reality to the humble person who doesn't mind being called a 'fool' by the world.

I am glad to declare today: *I'm a fool for Christ – who's fool are you?*