

The Journey to fulfilment

18 Dec. 2012

Luke 2:1-5

Have you ever been on a long journey where the future was both unknown and uncertain?

For a few minutes, try to put yourselves in the shoes of Joseph and Mary as they undertook the long arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Having received assurances, from the angel, that Mary's pregnancy was for God's special purposes, a number of important events occurred.

1] Mary's intended marriage to Joseph was brought forward, once Joseph had indicated, to both families, his willingness to continue with the arrangement.

As mentioned last week, this not only spared Mary, and her family the shame of being an unmarried mother, but also meant she was spared possible stoning by hard-line legalists in the province.

2] The emperor of Rome, **Caesar Augustus**, who ruled from **27 BC to 14 AD**, called for a census. This was the first time there had been a counting of all the people in the Roman Empire. As we read in Lk.2:2, this took place at a time when **Quirinius** was governing in Syria.

Unfortunately, these two references do not give us an exact date for the census, however, when we read Matt.2:1 we note that **Herod the Great** was also ruling in Judea at this time, **and he died in 4 BC**.

So, our best guess is that the census took place in 5-6 BC. This mess up with the calendar dating has occurred over centuries, because of the inherent differences between the earlier Julian calendar, and the gradual adoption of the Gregorian calendar since the C.16th. In reality, it's amazing that our reckoning of time over the past 2000 years is only out by 4-5 years (0.2%).

Of further interest is that the census probably did not take place in winter, because of accessibility issues; nor spring and early summer, because of the importance of the grain harvests to the economies of the regions. Therefore, we can assume, fairly well, that the census took place around late summer to early autumn - sometime around July to September.

3] The third important event was that the census required everyone to be registered in the traditional birthplace of their family or clan - ie. their ancestral homes. This meant that, for a few weeks either side of the census period, there was an enormous migration of people throughout the Roman empire.

The journey for Joseph and Mary, from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea was, relatively speaking, not very far - only about 80 kilometres, as the crow flies. What made this journey so arduous was that, by this time, Mary was heavily pregnant.

No worries, just hop into a fully optioned, comfortable, air-conditioned, well sprung 4WD! **Oh, sorry!**

Take 2! Joseph and Mary had to walk, however, tradition seems to indicate that maybe Mary rode on a donkey. I certainly hope so!

Now, there were two main routes they could have taken. The slightly shorter route was across the Jezreel Valley and through the province of Samaria, but the terrain was quite rugged and difficult.

The slightly longer route was to cross east of the river Jordan, follow south along the Jordan valley and cross the river again near Jericho, before turning west to Bethlehem. To add to the difficulties of this route, from Jericho to Bethlehem there is a steady climb of just over 1,000 metres. Despite this, this was certainly the easier route of the two, however it extended their journey to around 120kms.

A healthy man could manage this in maybe 4-5 days, **BUT** a man with a pregnant wife would have had to travel much slower. For Joseph and Mary, the journey probably took around 8-10 days. Fortunately, they would have travelled along a common trade route, and they would have met quite a few other travellers along the way.

Camping out in the open would have been a challenge for Joseph, especially for Mary's comfort. I am sure however that Joseph did his very best to make Mary's situation as comfortable as possible.

Of course, they would have taken **some** food with them, but cooking meals may have presented a few difficulties.

The biggest issue would have been that of personal security. The hill country and narrow valleys were a constant hiding place for brigands and thieves. The best security was in numbers, and so the ideal was to attach yourself to a travelling caravan of traders. The difficulty for Joseph and Mary was that they were not able to travel as fast, or as far as most others, each day.

With all these difficulties and concerns, what sustained Joseph and Mary during these days of travelling? Was it the beauty of the scenery? **No!**

Was it the fact that they had no choice in the matter, and simply had to do what they had to do? **Maybe!**

Was it the promise of the angel, knowing they were in the will of God? **I am sure!**

Today, all over the world, people are embarking on a variety of difficult journeys. They may be journeys, like Joseph and Mary, of travelling from one location to another. Almost every day we see the results of people migrating mainly from African and middle Eastern countries to escape poverty, in the hope of a new and better life for themselves and their children. They are prepared to endure many hardships, and they sometimes take enormous risks, even to risking their very lives.

Other people may take journeys that do not necessarily involve travelling. These journeys can be emotional journeys, where people may risk their heart or health in the hope of a better life.

Over the years, Cheryl and I have met a few young women who agreed to marry for reasons other than love, friendship and devotion. These girls were hoping for financial security from poverty. They were hoping for material comforts and a life of ease, rather than hard toil, as they saw with their parents.

The risk for these girls was that the men they had agreed to marry may not always be men of honesty, integrity, loyalty and fidelity. If they turned out to be an abusive louse, then the girls could spend the rest of their lives in regret and heartache.

I am sure you can think of other kinds of journeys people may take. I just want to mention one more, and that is the Spiritual journey that we all go on, one way or another.

This is the deep journey of the inner soul. It can be a very lonely journey as we grapple with 'Who am I?', 'What is my life purpose?' and 'Who is God?'. Now, you may say that the 'Who am I' journey is not a spiritual journey but a psychological one. This may be true if there is no God and we are not a part of His created handiwork. **But, there is, and we are!**

Having said this, I applaud the insights and understandings of many Christian Psychologists who today give us a deeper appreciation of who we are in our relationship with God, especially for those people who are deeply emotionally troubled and needing special care and attention.

This **is** a spiritual journey, because, so often the solutions and answers are not found within ourselves by navel gazing, but by looking through and beyond ourselves to the wonder and majesty of a God who loves and cares for us **beyond** our imperfections and failings.

The journey of discovering who God is, is the ultimate Spiritual journey. So often, mankind has sought to control the direction of this journey, and therefore make God subject to his will; in his own image; or the image of what he wants God to be.

The truly Spiritual journey however, is the one where we take our hands **off** the controls, and **allow God to be who He IS**; and allow Him to make Himself known to us at His own choosing - not ours. This is, for many, the hardest journey, because we embark on this journey never knowing where it will take us, or how long it will last. In a sense, it is a lifelong journey of facing the mystery of God, of waiting on Him, and of discovering His true nature and purpose for our life and being.

The journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem was not only a spiritual journey for them of discovering who God is, but also part of God's journey of revelation and incarnation.

In this journey, we discover the heart of God for all humanity to know Him, and to truly be able to connect with Him - the creator with the created.

Of course, for any journey to have any hope of success and fulfilment, the preparations must be well undertaken; the risks must be well considered; and the outcomes and benefits well understood. While none of these, in our human sense, guarantee ultimate success in our different journeys, they do give us a measure of hope and confidence.

Just like Joseph and Mary would have made certain preparations, based on their knowledge of the distance to be travelled, the terrain to be encountered, and the possible risks involved, so we should do the same when we embark on any worthwhile journey.

It is when we are faced with the need to embark on hazardous or difficult life journeys that we discover the Lord's enabling, step by step, and eventually we reach our destination. It is in these journeys that we discover we have not been alone. We have a loving Lord who goes with us and watches over us.

Conclusion:

As we prepare for this Christmas, the celebration of God's incarnation in the person of our Lord Jesus, we can be mindful of those who are currently travelling on difficult journeys.

For them, Christmas 2011 may not hold the same joy, hope and expectation that we may have. They may be facing all manner of hardships: security, financial, emotional or health difficulties.

They will be in need of a kind word of comfort, a genuine smile of friendship, and the prayerful touch of the hand of the Lord on their life.

As we think about the journey Joseph and Mary undertook to Bethlehem, we begin to realise that life is full of many journeys. As God was with them; leading, strengthening, protecting and comforting, so we can be assured that God will also be with us in all our journeys of life.

Praise His name forever!