

JOURNEY WITH JESUS

A. THE PIONEER

1. The Rising Sun

It is part of the joy of pregnancy to spend delightful weeks planning the clothes, the toys, and the nursery for the child that is soon to be born. Every child is special and deserves this careful, tender planning.

But there is one Child whose birth had been planned for many centuries: that Child was not just special, but unique. His name was Jesus. St Paul says in **Galatians 4:4** – "*When the time had fully come*, God sent his Son." Again in **Romans 5:6** he says, "*At just the right time* Christ died for the ungodly." And Jesus himself said, at the beginning of his ministry, "*The time has come*". (**Mark 1:15.**) Let's look at how the world was being prepared for the advent of Jesus Christ and all that that would signify to the human race.

The Jews were taken into exile by the Babylonians in 586 BC but after 70 years they were released by a decree of Cyrus, the sensible and fair-minded ruler of the Persian Empire, which had replaced the Babylonian Empire as ruler of the world. Under the Persians the Jews were allowed a great deal of freedom and were able to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem by 516 BC and renew their worship of God in their own land.

In 336 BC Alexander the Great conquered the Persians and made Greece the mistress of the world. He established the city of Alexandria in Egypt as a centre of Greek culture and made Greek the world language, the language of learning and of commerce. Even the Israelites absorbed the Greek culture and language, so that many of the rising generation no longer knew Hebrew as their mother tongue and could no longer follow the sacred text in the synagogue services. Many Jews had settled in Alexandria and in about 277 BC a panel of resident scholars translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek. Called the Septuagint, this version was widely used by both Jews and Gentiles and thus had a wide influence on the people of the world. So what had previously been known only in the sanctuary, only in the old tongue, and only to the one nation, was now all at once available and intelligible for people of other tongues and races. Moreover, the mythological gods of Greece and Rome were losing their hold, and people were hungry for a real and satisfying religion. Throughout the world, learned people now knew something about the Old Testament through the Septuagint – God was preparing the people of the world to receive the message of the Gospel.

In the century before Christ, the Romans conquered the Greeks, but they could not stop the influence of the Greek culture which had permeated the world. The New Testament was written in the colloquial Greek, as distinct from the classical Greek of the philosophers and poets. Life in the Roman Empire took on the stamp of Greece. The "Ten Cities" – Decapolis – of the gospels took Athens as their model. They had temples sacred to Zeus and Artemis, they had their theatre, their pillared forum, their stadium, their gymnasium and their baths. Only the many small towns and villages in Galilee, as in Judah, retained their Jewish style of architecture – and in fact it was in these genuine Jewish communities that Jesus lived and worked. But Greek dress and the Greek way of life had already penetrated into these purely Jewish communities – the Greek tunic and cloak, shoes or sandals, and a hat or cap for head covering. Furniture included a bed and the Greek habit of reclining at meals was generally adopted.

Jewish independence had now come to an end, although the Romans allowed the High Priest to continue in office. Rome tolerated and even encouraged various religions, on the principle that all men everywhere were bound to honour their ancestral gods. When Christ was born, Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, ruled the world. An Idumean (a descendant of Esau, traditional enemies of Israel) was appointed as king in Israel. Known as Herod the Great, he

was not a Jew nor liked by the Jews: small wonder he was alarmed when the wise men asked him, "Where is he that is born king of the Jews?"

But the Roman Empire brought many benefits. In general there was peace throughout the world and peoples of all nations were allowed a good deal of freedom. The function of a Roman provincial governor was to keep his province quiet by any means. Roman roads and shipping routes made travel easy and safe, and there was good communication through the medium of letters – ready for the epistles of Paul! Long journeys by sea and land, such as Paul undertook, were in those days nothing out of the ordinary. Roman roads were the finest and well-maintained, well equipped with halts for changing chariots and horses. Inns and hostelries offered rest and refreshment to travellers. A special police force was responsible for the protection of the roads against the attacks of brigands; this marvellous network of roads throughout the empire was a masterpiece of Roman skill and organization. Moreover, Rome had melded the world into one. A traveller could go from Asia Minor in the east to Spain in the west, and still be in the Roman Empire. There were no frontiers, no passports, no iron curtain or similar barrier to hinder him. There was nothing to stop the spread of the Gospel.

By the time Christ was born there were 4 million Jews in Palestine, but there were many more scattered throughout the civilized world. There may have been as many as a million in Egypt, and there were tens of thousands of them in Rome. Alexander the Great had founded many cities all over the east and in almost every one, he had granted the Jews the rights of citizenship. The Jews, as always, were the great traders and bankers of the world, and as such they made useful citizens. And wherever they lived, the Jews took the worship of God with them. It is significant to note that, through their exile, they had learnt their lesson at last, and nevermore did they worship pagan idols. Whatever other failings they had, after the exile they worshipped only the one true God. Away from the Temple at Jerusalem, they built their synagogues as their centre of religious life and instruction. Wherever there were 10 Jewish families, there had to be a synagogue, where, on each Sabbath, they would assemble to pray, read the Scriptures and hear an address from anyone who had a message to give. For the Jews, the word of God was central to life.

But their congregation consisted of far more than the local Jews. Men of many nations were becoming weary of the worship of a whole host of gods, and tired of the low moral standards of heathen ways. They found in the God of the Jews someone worthy of their worship; they found in the Ten Commandments and the Jewish laws a code of living and of morals that was a satisfying foundation for life. Some of these people actually became circumcised and were known as proselytes, but the majority simply came to the synagogue to find out more about the true God and how to live a good life: these were known as God-fearers. These people, as we can learn from the story of Acts, were as fields ripe for the harvesting with the Gospel!

So the time had fully come - one language, safe and efficient means of communication throughout the world in a time of peace, the dissemination of the knowledge of the Old Testament among civilized people, and the maintenance of the worship of the one true God through the establishment of synagogues wherever the Jewish people had settled. God had prepared not just a nursery, but the whole world, for his Son.

We stand in awe at the wisdom of God in planning such great preparation, but what is mind-boggling is the fact that God can do just the same in the individual life, if only we let Him. Can you look back over your own life and see how things that happened were part of the marvellous planning of God? Does that help your faith when you don't understand the things that happen to you in the present?

Jesus – Turning Point for the World. Luke 1 and 2. We know the Christmas story so well - or do we? Over the years so much tradition has built up around this focal point in the Word of God that we are inclined to miss the true wonder and glory of the Incarnation of the Son of God.

The setting is not a happy one. In the year 6 BC Palestine had been ruled by Herod the Great for 30 years, but now this dark and wicked ruler was sinking into madness and dissolution. In two years, to no-one's regret, he would be gone. Yet in this darkness there were two Godly figures who would play a key role in the rising of the "Sun of Righteousness" who would bring life and light and gladness to the Jewish nation and to the whole world. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were both of priestly descent from the line of Aaron. **Chapter 1:9** tells us that in this year, Zechariah as a priest had been chosen for the once-in-a-lifetime privilege of offering incense in the temple and offering up to God the prayers of all those in Israel who truly loved and worshipped him.

And in this place of duty, at the hour of worship, God sent his angel to the aging Zechariah. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah," was the angel's greeting, "your prayer has been heard." What prayer? A prayer for the nation's prosperity, or some other blessing? Or a prayer that this childless couple should finally bear a son? Surely they had given up on that many years ago!

And then in utter amazement Zechariah listened as the angel continued, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you ... he will be great in the sight of the Lord ... he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth ... he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (**verses 13-17**). Notice that the angel quoted **Malachi 4:6**, the message of hope that closes the Old Testament. After 400 years it was about to have its fulfilment.

And now, at this amazing time, the great old saint of God stumbles. Amazing, yes, that this teacher of Scripture could not bring himself to believe its very words. "How can I be sure of this?" he mumbled to the angel. "I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

You can hear the astonishment in the angel's reply in **verses 19,20**. "I am Gabriel! I stand in the presence of God! I have been sent to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

And so Zechariah goes home dumb, unable to share the wonder of his experience with those who had looked to him to lead them in the worship of God! But can we blame him? Isn't there a mirror here, where we can see ourselves? How often has our lack of trust silenced our witness, and delayed the blessing that God had planned for us?

In any case, the delighted Elizabeth conceived and praised God for her own personal fulfilment.

Meantime, Gabriel had another job to do. Six months had passed and now he had a message for the young and virtuous Mary, a girl of Nazareth who was engaged to the man Joseph; they were both descendants of David. **Luke 1:26-38** has the story. "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." Mary, unused to chatting with angels, was "greatly troubled" but Gabriel reassured her, "Don't be afraid, Mary. You have found favour with God. You will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Mary no doubt found it hard to comprehend the import of this message and the tremendous honour and glory it promised - but neither could she at first realise the shame and suffering that would be entailed. Sufficient to say that she bowed in submission with "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Can you imagine the reaction when this young teenager confided to her mother that she was pregnant? Can you imagine the shattering effect on Joseph when he learned the dreadful

news? His side of the story is told in **Matthew 1:18-25**. According to the law divorce was the only course to take, although he was man enough to plan to do it privately to avoid as much disgrace as possible. Only the angel's personal vision to him put his mind at rest. He accepted the confirmation that this baby, to be called Jesus, was a special gift from God through the Holy Spirit, and from then on he exhibited the peak of godly manliness, care and self-control towards his beloved - still virgin - and the child she was to bear. Note that Joseph was not an old man who only craved companionship; he and Mary had at least six more children after the birth of Jesus. (See **Matthew 13:55,56**, where the word used is "delphos" meaning "brother" and not "anepsios" meaning "cousin".)

Perhaps the snide remarks around the neighbourhood became too much for young Mary. **Luke 1:39-56** puts it graphically. Having learnt from the angel that her cousin Elizabeth was by now six months pregnant and would actually understand the situation, she took off on a four-day journey to seek a refuge there. It is interesting to note that Mary readily sought out the priest's house. It was the duty of the priest to stone to death a lass who had been impure; Mary obviously had a clear conscience.

And what balm it must have been for Mary to be greeted by Elizabeth who, "filled with the Holy Spirit", exclaimed "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Even her unborn son John apparently recognized the presence of his cousin/master as he gave a great leap in Elizabeth's womb! The aged lady finished with the comforting statement "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said will be accomplished!"

Ecstatic with relief, Mary burst into a song of thankfulness to her God; we call it The Magnificat. (**Luke 1:46-55**). "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." Here we see that while we may admire and even honour Mary for the role she was to play, we must not worship her; she too needed a saviour. Her thanks to God extended from her own personal joy to the blessing that was to come to the moral, social and economic factors of all Israel. If the words of this song had come direct from Mary's mind and not borrowed from an existing hymn (and why else would Luke have bothered to record it?) its logical structure shows that this simple peasant lass was a young lady of high intelligence.

Mary stayed in that haven for a restorative three months, and I can imagine the pleasant hours spent in "women's talk" and a happy stock-piling of baby clothes! And it would have been a huge encouragement for Mary to witness the birth of John and to hear the now-vocal, Spirit-filled Zechariah in his song of praise to God "who has come and redeemed his people ... in the house of his servant David ... and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham ... to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." But special to Mary would have been his summing up - "And you, my child, will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him" - meaning the very son she was to bear! - "because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ... to guide our feet into the path of peace."

God was giving to Mary a great privilege and a great burden, but she would not have to bear it alone. Her loving Father would be alongside in tender care and guidance and the strength she would need from day to day. Special help for a special task - but we are all special to God and the service we do for him is just as special. We do not need to go it alone - he is with us!