

Advent Bible Study – Little Town Big Story 4

This Advent study takes as its theme the well known carol, 'O little town of Bethlehem' written in 1868 by Phillips Brooks an Episcopal priest as a suitable carol for his Sunday School. Each study takes its theme from a verse of the carol.

Study Four 'The great glad tidings tell'

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel

The great glad tidings

The Christmas story is not one that can be ignored, much as the world would like to by focusing on commercial rather than spiritual possibilities. God brings Grace through this Holy Child of Bethlehem as a gift to a graceless world. The author Philip Yancey calls 'grace' our truly last best word, 'It contains the essence of the gospel as a drop of water can contain the image of the sun.' Jesus' birth was accompanied by a response.

The Magi offered their gifts and bowed down to worship him. Angels were heard by the shepherds singing 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace to men on whom his favour rests.' and the shepherds, once they had seen Jesus rushed off to tell all their friends '...glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen..' The Christmas story challenges us to make a response, as it did with all who made the journey to the manger.

Have you found the Christ child?

That might seem like a simple question to a group of churchgoers, but it is a fact that there are a large percentage of the population who would consider themselves 'religious' or 'spiritually minded' but who have an understanding of the divine that doesn't really allow for God breaking into the here and now of human existence as a baby. In a sense, their faith is not a million miles away from the Jews of Jesus' time who were living Old Testament lives in New Testament times - their Salvation dependent upon their own efforts and sacrificial offerings.

"You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool; you can spit at him and kill him for a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

(C.S. Lewis)

The Christian faith is centred upon the amazing Grace that manifested itself in the Christ child. As Clement of Rome (c95AD) said 'Through him we see as in a mirror the spotless and excellent face of God'

God inhabits the praises of his people, and despite rumours to the contrary does move with the times! We do not worship a historic God, we worship a contemporary God - who Scripture tells us is the same yesterday, today and forever! We glorify God, by showing his love, forgiveness and compassion in the world by our actions and our words.

We have seen on our study of this popular hymn the importance of a place, Bethlehem. We have looked at the character of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the symbolism of the gifts. Lastly we have looked briefly at the greatest gift of all, the Christ child and looked at what our response should be to this gift of grace to humankind.

As we approach Christmas this year how will you celebrate the birth of Jesus?

Questions for discussion

1. The carol says 'O come to us, abide with us...' What do you understand by this phrase?
2. Do you feel that as a church we effectively tell out the glad tidings of the Gospel message to our neighbourhood? How could we do this better?
- 3 Think about how the church 'does worship'. Are there ways in which worship could be made more relevant to those who might come through the door?