

Micah 5:2-5a- Christmas Day 2016

² But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past. ³ The people of Israel will be abandoned to their enemies until the woman in labor gives birth. Then at last his fellow countrymen will return from exile to their own land. ⁴ And he will stand to lead his flock with the LORD's strength, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. Then his people will live there undisturbed, for he will be highly honoured all around the world. ⁵ And he will be the source of peace. [NLT]

If you grew up in a small town - or even a village - you will know the feeling of having to describe to people where that is - and it gets more difficult the bigger the distance is, that you are from the place you grew up in. It's almost like viewing something with binoculars turned around, Wartburg?! - never heard of it.

Bethlehem - that little town we will sing of just now - was such a place. A town hardly anyone knew about. Yet God knows small towns and the people that live there. Once before in history he had found little Bethlehem on the map of Israel when he sent Samuel there to find David, and to anoint him as king.

Once again Bethlehem was to be found by God - as we heard yesterday evening already. About the meaning and influence of this 'little town', "E. Stanley Jones (1884-1973), a twentieth century Methodist missionary and theologian, tells how once he travelled from France to India by plane. In early morning he left Marseilles and stopped to refuel at Corsica. He remembered that it was from this island that Napoleon went forth to conquer the world. At noon he had lunch in Naples; and as he lunched, his mind went back to the Caesars who had gone forth from this land to subdue the earth. At nightfall he was in Greece, and in memory he went back to Alexander the Great, who, starting from this ancient land of might and culture, had gone forth to be a world conqueror.

The next day he flew past Assyria on the right and Babylon on the left, lands from which mighty monarchs had gone forth to make the earth tremble. As he

flew over these countries, he said he was struck by the fact that every one of these mighty empires, with their powerful dictators, is dead and gone. Within each empire had been the seed of its own decay and dissolution – the seed of human sin.

Only one empire, begun in the lands over which he flew, still remains. And that is the empire which had its humble beginning in unspectacular Palestine – in the little town of Bethlehem.

The King who was born in a stable, cradled in straw, rejected by men, and nailed to a cross, still *reigns!* He reigns on earth by the might of His omnipotence, still governing the destinies of nations. Napoleons, Caesars, Alexanders, and all the others that come to mind have come and gone. Dictators, despots, conquerors still march across the pages of history, and each has his little day. But the Babe who was born in Bethlehem, God Himself has told us: "He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Highest . . . and of His kingdom there shall be no end." (From Creative Worship for Christmas Eve)

In spite of being an insignificant town at the time of Jesus' birth, it is a town so well known to everyone of us who knows the Christmas story. It is not the size of the town that counts, but who was born there! It has always been God's way to do things in this way: to take what seems small - and to make something great from it.

So we come 'to Bethlehem' again today, because of who was born there. The promise was of a mighty ruler - One who would do great things for the people of God. Yet, all the people at the time could see was a small baby, wrapped in cloths just like any other child. The only unusual thing about this birth, was where in Bethlehem this child was born - in a stable.

The great turning point in the history of mankind starts in a quiet and isolated place. Could God not have planned this all a bit better? - one might ask. After all, he had many centuries to do so. Even the more recent past should have given him enough time to plan for a more suitable place for his Son to be born. After all, God himself had sent the angel Gabriel to Mary 9 months

previously, telling her that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Did God then not care about his Son - did he not care about the mother who would bear this child?

The only conclusion we can come to is that God planned that Joseph and Mary were not meant to find place in an inn. God's plan was that his Son - this long awaited Messiah - was meant to be born in the 'stable'.

It was not a case of God not caring about his Son - this was how God showed His caring for us! By planning that his Son should be born like this, God wanted to show just how important all people are for him. Being born in a stable meant that the first people told of his birth - those shepherds on the fields before Bethlehem - could go in to see him. God wanted everybody to share in this birth - and so his Son was born in a place where there were no guards, no strict nursing sisters, to stop visitors from going in to see him.

How do we come to Bethlehem? What hopes do we have of this 'new born king'? What do we hope to get from him? A ruler was born - the 'Prince of Peace', but how was he going to achieve this peace?

At the time of Jesus' birth there was 'peace' in the world - the peace of the Romans, 'Pax Romana'. This peace was brought about by the might of the Roman armies as they crushed the enemies of Rome. The methods they used to make sure that their peace was kept could be quite brutal - such as nailing those who dared to do rise in revolt against the Roman occupation of their lands to a wooden cross.

God's Son is born in a stable. He is born to a young woman of no social standing. He is born in a small town overshadowed by a mighty castle-fortress built by Herod. How could he hope to bring peace to his people - to us? Is the hope of peace not just a dream? A nice dream it is true - one we dream of as we send cards and messages bearing the message of 'peace and goodwill' to all - but only a dream.

Jesus is our peace - he comes to give us peace. What people did not

understand at first, was that the Messiah - although he was a descendant of King David - did not come to be a king in the normal way. About 33 years later he would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey - that was also something God had planned long ago. He was going to become king, but not by killing his enemies.

I remember as a child I thought that the cross should be taken down from the altar at Christmas time - after all we were remembering that Jesus was born at Christmas. But the cross is a part of this birth in the stable - God had planned it as well! Jesus comes to give us peace. He did so as he took the punishment for our sins and guilt on himself, and bore them up to the cross.

The cross - that instrument of torture by which the Romans wanted to force others to keep their peace - became God's way of making peace with his world. God makes his peace not by killing his enemies instead he had his beloved Son nailed to the cross: He sacrificed his Son - so that his enemies could become his children.

Jesus is our peace: not force of arms but service, not oppression but self-sacrifice, not war but love, the love of God - are the way in which he brings his peace and is our peace. This is God's gift to you - true peace and goodwill to all people.

Bethlehem might have been small and insignificant when Jesus was born there - but the result of his birth has truly been the greatest influence on our world. What happened at Bethlehem has changed the world - and it has changed us.