

4. Advent: Christ's birth fulfilled (Lk. 2: 1-7)

Dear Listeners,

Although they may not always be conscious of it, a great many people move away from the *reality* of daily life during *the days around Christmas*. They seem to end up on a side track of history. Afterwards they return to the normal routine of their human existence. This *routine* entails a *daily rhythm* of awakening in the morning, working during the day, and relaxing or diverting the attention through different activities at night; the *weeks*, too, have their routine of workdays and weekends; yes, even the ongoing *history* of the world in which they live knows its common features such as conflicts and wars, unrest and violence, economic ups and downs, etc. When the time of *Christmas* is approaching, however, every *rhythm* and *routine* must be *interrupted*. Workdays become holidays, normal light turns to Christmas lights, yes even the ongoing conflicts and wars make place for a temporary *truce* and artificial *peace*. For Christmas is *special*; the story *uncommon*, the history *abnormal*, the events *extra-ordinary*!

This special experience of Christmas, however, dear listeners, is *unlike* its very origin, the birthday of Christ! *Then* all things continued as usual, so much so that *no one was aware* of its great event. In the entire *world community* the happening went unnoticed. It's only through Divine interference by means of *angels* that the circle of *believers*, of *shepherds*, and of *scientists* paid attention to it. Without God's own information in His Word, no one would see *today* either what really went on at the time: namely, the *Son of God*, the Lord Jesus Christ, placed the history of church and world on the *track of salvation*! The Son of *God* entered upon the world of *man*, lost in sin, upon the history of *misery*, of church and world! This world and history of misery and disaster would have remained *unchanged*, had not the Son of God come down! By God's *rule* and the Son's *birth* the history of church and world was *changed*, breaking through every routine, every rule, and every rut! Now He, the *Lord* Jesus still rules the ways of the world and still controls the courses of history! That is the *gospel*, dear listeners of Christ's birth, about the real *truth*, which we celebrated just two days ago!

Luke described the story of *Christ's birth* in such a way that with a few changes in the names, it could have happened *today*. Chapter 2 starts out with the names of some *great* and *prominent* men. We could mention a few of those names for our time as well. *Augustus* and *Quirinius* were men who could make or break their subjects, if they deemed this necessary. We know such people *today* as well. They became well-known *all over*, because their decisions affected *many*: one decree could break up the whole society and bring the whole world in motion. A few important *world leaders* could do so *today* also!

Augustus, the mighty Caesar of Rome, completely controlled the political situation in the world. Without his *permission*, no country in the inhabited world could as much as *move*. It was impossible to get around *him* in any decision or plan.

When putting it this way, it *almost* sounds like the description of the *power of God*. Well, indeed, to *Augustus* *divine* names and *divine* honour was given. The world didn't need a *Saviour*; he was there already: *Augustus*, the *exalted one*, was his name! He *earned* that name by his noble rule. He pursued the freedom, the peace, and the prosperity of his subjects. He was a man with *high ideals* for the world. Well, from this *Augustus* the decree came that a kind of *census*, a complete *registration*, of his entire empire should take place! So that's what happened, however cumbersome and troublesome that would be for his *subjects*! Is this actually not the *same* still, dear listeners? *What* do people talk about? What are people looking for? In world affairs is not the first question: What will *Washington* do? How will *London*, *Paris*, *Berlin*, or *Moscow* respond? The world situation depends on the powers of men like them! In that framework you also have to see the *census*, which took place when the Son of God was coming into this world.

This *census* had been in progress for quite a while already. Now, however, also the people of *Israel* become involved. Those people, too, are part of the whole of the *Roman Empire*, and nothing more. Joseph was confronted with the question of *compliance* or *revolt* as well. After all, *Joseph* is from the generation of *David*; he is the heir par excellence! Would he have to pay *taxes*? Should he submit to the call of registration? *Joseph* also set out on a journey, together with *Mary* his wife. She comes along, even if this was not really necessary. No, that was not a matter of sacrificing *principles* for practical *purposes*. This was a case of *humiliation*, ordained by God Himself! Already before His birth the promised son of *David*, who at the same time is Son of God, was *subjected* to the decree of the Caesar. Why? Well, dear listener, because there was yet *another One* who also *assessed* the world and mankind. God! And He determined that due to sin *nothing* could be *collected* from this earth. The world was in a condition of total *bankruptcy*! Unless..., unless God *Himself* would interfere! Unless He would, unlike *Augustus*, seek to *give* to them, yes *give* His own *Son* for the salvation of the world!

Above the government buildings in *Rome*, the centre of the world, dear listeners, the Almighty God is enthroned. Without knowing it, *Caesar Augustus* is *subservient* to God and His plan. Against his will, he must cooperate in the *break-through* of the kingdom of heaven! In Luke 2 we read, "*In those days...*" What days? In the days that were described in chapter 1 of Luke's account! In the days in which the LORD, the God of heaven and earth, *prepared* everything for the coming of His Son in the flesh! Then, in *those* days, God came to visit His people! It was not *Augustus'* agenda which determined the birth of the Christ in Bethlehem, but God's *program* which ordained the census of Israel!

When the son of *David*, together with *his* son according to the law, underwent the greatest *humiliation*, the LORD spoke *His* decree so that *His Son* would go through suffering to glory, through death to the victory over death and over all the enemies of life!

What a comfort dear listeners, this gospel of Christ's birth, also in *our* world filled with turmoil. Many are filled with fear. Today as well, there are *dictators*, who are after others, seeking what they can *take*. Peoples and nations are run underfoot, starving, massacred. The message of *Luke 2*, however, proclaims that the throne of *God* is set up also *above* Syria, Iraq, and North Korea. You don't have to become nervous when you watch the shocking news flashes. All power in heaven and on earth has been given to *Him* who came from Bethlehem to the *heavenly Jerusalem*. With this message He sent His disciples into the world. Only a few years later the apostle *Paul*, a servant of Jesus Christ, is standing in *Rome*. There he proclaims *the Name* of the Saviour of the world! What a comfort! The gospel of Christ's *birth* teaches us, that where *our* human considerations see *darkness*, the plan of *God* works *light* and makes progress in His work toward the coming of His kingdom! Jesus Christ is King! *He* reigns! *His* power does not manifest itself in *spectacular* ways. He seeks us in our *poverty*; He finds us in our *misery* due to sin! Thus He came to you and me also dear listeners that we would *believe* in Him, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the only Name given by which we can be *saved*!