

One of the advantages to living in Worthing is that there is a civic art gallery; I was born in Brighton and there was an even larger art gallery there which I often visited as a young boy. Yet at this time of the year, almost every home arranges its own improvised exhibition of pictures. It may be on the mantelpiece; or spread over the bookshelves. Some people string them on a line across the walls, or dangle them on ribbon from the picture rail. But however they are arranged, there is no variability about the subject matter; they are Christmas cards. Although the words and messages on the cards are important and we are thankful to have them, it is usually the picture that is displayed. Most of them are very attractive too, though some less than others.

Christmas cards did not exist 2,000 years ago, yet St Luke has his own exhibition of Christmas pictures, beautifully drawn in words. There are seven altogether, and we have just heard a few mentioned in the Gospel reading (Luke 1.26-38). To get the best out of any picture gallery, it helps to have a guide. So I will guide you around St Luke's exhibition in his Gospel.

First, in chapter One (5-25), we have the annunciation to Zechariah of the birth of a son to his aged wife named Elizabeth, a cousin to Mary; then as we heard today, comes the annunciation to the young girl, Mary, of the birth of a son to herself (26-38). Following this is the scene of the meeting between these two mothers-to-be (39-56). After this is portrayed the miraculous birth of John, later called "the Baptist" (57- 80).

We now come to the second collection of pictures, in chapter 2, starting with the miraculous birth of Jesus (1-20). Then we see the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, 8 days later (21). Lastly, we look at a kind of 'Epilogue' to the Christmas story. This is the visit to the Temple of Jesus at the age of 12 years (41-52). This is the last recorded occasion of the 'Holy Family' all together.

It is interesting why Luke arranged these pictures this way. It is likely that he arranged them in some special order, so that he might say and show something about Jesus. Here are not one but two miraculous births: one to a woman well past the age of child-bearing; the other to a young woman who is a virgin. Two mothers meeting with two songs of praise, one for each child: what we call the Benedictus for John usually sung at Matins, and the Magnificat for Jesus, which we sang as our first hymn. Two receptions of the children: John among his family and friends at his circumcision. Jesus in the Temple with his parents: and an offering of just two turtle-doves or pigeons, the poor man's gift.

The message that St Luke is saying about Jesus is clear. Simply, that the importance of this child lies in his destiny to be the great shepherd of all mankind. This is something that calls for the loudest of praise. Each picture has an important part to show in the exhibition; but perhaps out of them all, the fifth one holds the clue. This is the one that tells us (2.11): "for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord". That tells us that this is not some strange upstart deliverer or freedom fighter with no background. This one belongs to the city of

David. His roots stretch right back in an impeccable pedigree.

Jesus' own immediate tale starts in a priestly family related to him, obeying a ritual order, in the person of his kinsman Zechariah, a servant of the Temple of the Lord. The deliverer of mankind does not seize his position; he inherits it. But it is not empty authority; it is personal to himself as well. Not only is he nurtured in a traditional background, he has the remarkable ability to stand up to doctors of the Law; at the age of 12 years in the Temple itself.

What is more significant is that Jesus' mission is not only for the Jews. It will start among them, but he is to be "The light to lighten the Gentiles", as well as the glory of God's people of Israel. So this Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David the great king. The first to visit Jesus were the shepherds from David's fields, because this child born in a manger is to be the greatest shepherd of people everywhere. The angel choir sang his praises with "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men". The church's great liturgical hymn is appropriate for us, and also for celestial lips. It tells of one greater than all, in the scope of his service to both God and man.

This then is the great lesson to be grasped at Christmas time; an oft-repeated lesson, which is still not fully grasped. So often we restrict Jesus, by thinking of him only as the saviour of the Church. He is that, but he is much more. He is the world's Saviour, the saviour of society, the saviour of civilisation, if we let him. People cannot live together in peace on earth and security, unless they take the Christ-spirit into their life. Whilst it is easier to do this if we know and accept him; it is possible to live according to his will and spirit without direct knowledge, as many have found, by following the example of his true disciples. Unless we have this spirit to guide us: then exploitation and expropriation; death and destruction: these become the order of the day, no matter how sophisticated we grow. Jesus Christ is the saviour of all men and women. That is the message and inspiration of Luke's Christmas exhibition of seven pictures.

Looking at my cards this year, I will try to remember that they not only represent the love and affection of my relatives and friends on earth; they also point to the love of God for all mankind. Maybe you will try to do the same. As a lovely Christmas carol says:

Love came down at Christmas  
Love all lovely, love divine  
Love was born at Christmas  
Star and angels gave the sign.

May God and the Christ-child give to you all, his blessing this Christmas-time and in the New Year.