

## Pastor's Page



### **Christmas In Bethlehem**

I received a very unusual Christmas card last week (my only one!) On the front was a picture of Santa Claus walking alongside a tall concrete wall. The terse message read *Christmas in Bethlehem*. On closer examination I discovered that the wall is the 400-mile-long concrete barrier built in 2005 to separate the Jewish and Palestinian areas and designed to stop suicide bombers! The card is produced by an organisation committed to tackling poverty and injustice and is deliberately provocative. Inside the message read;

*Blessed are the peacemakers -and all those who seek to build a future by removing walls of division - they shall be called the children of God.*

The final part of the message said *"As we celebrate the child born in Bethlehem let us not forget God's children living in Bethlehem today".* .

I don't know enough about the people who produced the card to know exactly what their agenda is (and I don't know what Santa was doing walking by the wall!) nonetheless it made me think. I so easily sing "Oh little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie" when in Bethlehem today there is very little "stillness" It is a divided city where terrorism is an ongoing reality and Christians live with the constant threat of persecution. Bethlehem is undoubtedly a troubled town and in this sense is not unlike it was 2000 years ago.

At the time of Jesus birth Judea (modern-day Israel/Palestine) where Bethlehem lies, was under Roman rule. Palestine was occupied territory. Jesus was born in obscurity and poverty to a young unmarried Hebrew girl in King David's ancestral home town. The first recorded visitors were shepherds, people who were right on the fringes of society. They had been looking after their sheep one night (probably sheep who'd been earmarked for the Jewish Passover sacrifice) when they were told by angelic beings that a savior, the long-awaited Messiah, had been born in Bethlehem. The clues were the cloths he was wrapped in and the food trough he was lying in! They found him and spread the word about him. Some time later travelers from the east enquired as to his whereabouts referring to him as King of the Jews. When Herod, the sadistic King of Judea (appointed by the Roman senate) heard this he was so outraged that he planned to kill him. But he used trickery sending the visitors off to search for him and report back on the pretence that he wanted to go and worship him too. This baby was obviously someone special if a King could talk about worshipping him (even if it was a trick!) When the plan failed he ordered the murder of all boys two years old and younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding area! But Jesus escaped as his mother and 'father' fled as refugees to Egypt in order to preserve his life. (For the rest of the story read Luke's Gospel!)

So then as today, the little town of Bethlehem was a dangerous place to be. But in this troubled town 2000 years ago God came down to earth in the form of Jesus to bring peace and salvation to all who will receive him. Jesus is the hope for Bethlehem, Birmingham, for you and for me. So let's pray that people this Christmas will find the peace that only Jesus can bring.

"Oh come let us adore him, Christ the King" Have a very happy Christmas.

21<sup>st</sup> December 2008