

Christmas Day

Luke 2:1-20

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14

If you're a vicar who has regular contact with local schools, you tend to find that when the children get to know you a little, they start to ask you some of the big questions of life. And it's inevitable that one of those questions will be, 'Do you believe in Father Christmas?', to which my standard reply is, 'you'll have to ask your teacher about that one'. If I wanted to be honest, though, my answer to the question would be 'yes' *and* 'no'. Yes, in the sense that there was indeed a guy in the 4th century called Nicholas of Myra who was a Greek bishop, and who reputedly went around giving gifts secretly to the poor. But in the modern understanding of Father Christmas, I would have to say that *no*, he certainly doesn't exist – he's really the product of an advertising campaign by the Coca-Cola company, dating back to the 1930s. So, if you ever hear someone coming down your chimney early on Christmas morning, my advice would be to call the police!

Good fun though it might be to hold out some hope that a bearded stranger in red might come our way with a few freebie presents, I'd rather put *my* hope and trust in the One about whom Christmas is *really* all about. The account of the birth of Jesus Christ which lies at the very heart of the *real* story of Christmas – the greatest story ever told – is certainly *not* the stuff of 'make believe', but rather it's absolutely grounded in *reality*.

To start with, these amazing events were all taking place within a context of political domination and oppression – a situation in which so many people across the globe find themselves caught up in our *own* day. The primary reason why the Holy Family ended up in Bethlehem in the first place, was because of a decree of the ruling Roman powers that everyone had to be registered in their own town. There was certainly no ring of glory about *that*. God entered our world in human form, yet he did so in a very down-to-earth way – the King of kings was born, *not* in a royal palace, but in poverty.

So, let's journey to Bethlehem and hear again the message of the angels to the shepherds. Because first of all, that message speaks to us of the fact that the child born that first Christmas was no ordinary child. He's described as 'Saviour' – the name 'Jesus' itself means 'the Lord of salvation'. In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, the prophet talks of the people walking in darkness seeing a great light – and this prophecy finds its ultimate fulfilment in *Jesus*, who comes as a light into the world, to rescue us from the darkness of sin and death. It's great to celebrate the baby Jesus lying in a manger at Christmas - but the thing is, the story doesn't simply begin and *end* at Christmas. Because at Easter we remember that the same Jesus – God made man – also died on the Cross and rose again from the dead so that our sins may be forgiven, and so that we may have eternal life. That's why, even on this Christmas Day, our worship is set in the context of Holy Communion, reminding us of Christ's death on the Cross and his resurrection from the dead; Christmas and Easter are inseparable.

And then the angel calls the new-born baby 'Lord' – *Κυριος* – the same word used by Luke on several occasions elsewhere in his Gospel to refer to *God*. Because this *Jesus*, the Saviour and Messiah, is indeed *God*, come to dwell amongst us. The hopes and dreams of all the years have indeed come to fulfilment in the One who "is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace," as the prophet Isaiah had declared many centuries earlier. It's through Jesus that *we* can know God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, personally – God *invites* us to enter into a relationship with him through his Son.

Then secondly, that invitation is extended to *all* people, regardless of their background, wealth or status in the eyes of the world. God chose to reveal his Son first of all *not* to the wealthy and powerful (that came later with the wise men), but rather to the *shepherds*. Shepherds at that time were pretty dodgy characters, to say the least. In fact, the sheep they tended were kept for sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem – the central place of worship for the

people of Israel; but the thing is, the shepherds *themselves* might never have actually been to the Temple – they weren't the most 'religious' folk in society. Nonetheless, it was to *them* that God chose to reveal his glory – no wonder they were terrified when the angel appeared to *them* of all people. *They* might not have been regulars at public worship - not regular churchgoers, we might say; but instead, *God* came to *them*. And in coming to them, God was showing that his love extends to *all* people. In his Letter to Titus, the Apostle Paul speaks of the grace of God which has been revealed to *all* people in Jesus Christ. *All* can know their sins forgiven through Christ's death on the Cross, and having received that forgiveness, to live godly lives - no longer living the way *we* want to, but living according to *God's* way.

God's invitation to the shepherds to come to the Christ child speaks to us powerfully of the fact that with God, there are *no* outsiders. *We* might feel that we're simply not good *enough* – that we're not worthy to come to God. But the thing is, none of us are – yet that's precisely the point. Because God

invites us to come to him *as we are* and he offers us a fresh start – a life *transformed* through Jesus.

And then thirdly, when we receive Jesus into our lives, he brings us *peace* – “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth *peace* among those whom he favours”, the angelic choir declares. We live in a world that's in desperate need of peace; though what is usually mean by the word 'peace' is simply an absence of war. By contrast, the peace which the angels speak of is of an altogether different order. The Roman world of the first century was experiencing what was called the *Pax Romana* / 'Roman Peace'; it was a merely external, superficial sense of tranquillity, borne out of domination and oppression. What the *angels* were proclaiming, though, was a truly profound, *everlasting* peace which comes from God alone. And *we* can know that *peace* for ourselves when we know Christ in *our* lives.

It's quite popular, these days, to put up a sign outside one's house at this time of year which simply

says, 'Santa Stop Here!' In the end, though, we don't need to bother about waiting for that elusive Santa to show up, because *Jesus* is already with us – he is in our midst at all times – and he can satisfy our very deepest desires in life; *he* is the *greatest* gift that we can receive. He brings us *true* hope and joy and peace.

So, this Christmas Day, may *our* response to the good news of the angels be like that of the shepherds. *They* hurried to Bethlehem to see the new-born Saviour of the world, and through encountering him, their lives were transformed – never to be the same again. May each one of *us* allow this same Jesus, born for us that *first* Christmas – to be born in *us today*. When we choose to do so, our lives are indeed changed for ever.