

Luke 2:8-20
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool
Traditional Carol Service
December 2007

Well it's that time of year again. We've sung the carols – except for what I hope will be a rousing rendition of *Hark! The herald Angels sing* in about 12 minutes time. We've heard the readings.

So it's time to relax, sit back and get ready for the minister's annual rant about how Christmas isn't what it used to be, how it's all become blatant materialism, how the real meaning of Christmas is being destroyed and perverted by Tesco, M&S and the global multinationals. Even McDonalds has a festive menu this year – Big Mac with cranberries or something.

That's the agenda for the carol service talk isn't it? Condemn rampant consumerism, commend a spiritually aware Christmas – and then go drink mulled wine!

Mind you it's not just religious types who are the new Scrooge's of Christmas. The world these days is full of sanctimonious ethical gift mongers who sometimes seem to want to give the impression that giving Gucci to a friend rather than goats for Africa puts you pretty much on a par with King Herod the baby killer in the great moral scheme of things.

And, to be honest, it's not even a recent trend to bemoan the tide of Christmas kitsch and plastic toys. Nearly 100 years ago E M Forster wrote about the same tendency in his great novel *Howard's End*, as he described the Christmas shopping experience of two of his principal characters...

They drove from shop to shop... Margaret decided on a horse for this little girl, a [doll] for that, for the rector's wife a copper warming tray... Margaret felt the grotesque impact of the unseen upon the seen, and saw issuing from a forgotten manger at Bethlehem this torrent of coins and toys... how many of these vacillating shoppers and tired shop assistants realised that it was a divine event that drew them together?

There you have it. And you've all turned up to church so you can experience your purging annual slap round the face about your wicked self-indulgent excesses.

Then we can go off and enjoy the rest of the festive season with just a little frisson of guilt as we tuck into a turkey the size of an exercise ball, and then head off to the gym to work with a real exercise ball to remove the turkey fat from round our waists.

But just hold on a minute. Is that really the Christian perspective on Christmas? Ought we to be commending what is, in the end, just a slightly more

restrained, ethically sensitive, environmentally conscious, sober alternative what everybody else does? A sort of Diet Christmas. Christmas with a bit less merrymaking. Christmas lite.

Well as I've spent this week reflecting on Dr Luke's account of the shepherds and the angels which we heard read to us earlier I have to say I'm not altogether sure that our problem is really that we have too much celebration at Christmas time.

I'm not convinced that eating and drinking too much, spending loads of money on gifts with no obvious use and illuminating our houses to look like something from a magic mushroom trip is really the heart of what is wrong in our society's attitude to Christmas.

So let's take a look at this carefully researched piece of ancient history and see what it has to say to us this Christmas...

Being a shepherd in ancient Israel was not a fat lot of fun. Nobody really has any idea what month Jesus was born in but the most likely candidate seems to be February. And even though the weather in Israel is a lot better than it is here (well where isn't the weather better than it is here!?) it's not a lot of fun sleeping in a field at any time of year in any climate.

Add to that the fact that being a shepherd was, for the most part, badly paid, moderately dangerous, had unsociable hours, was very smelly and kept you away from the ancient equivalent of church (thus making you something of an outsider in a very religious society) and you can see why shepherding wasn't the first career choice for upwardly mobile young men.

So it's a massive shock that into this very ordinary, even dreary and dull rural scene, suddenly, appearing in the night sky is an angel. A supernatural being so bright and huge that it as if the very presence of God has opened up before the shepherd's eyes.

We don't know if this is the same angel that has already appeared twice before in Luke's gospel – to a man called Zechariah and to Jesus' mother Mary. If it is he's probably getting a little weary of having to start every conversation with the line: "Do not be afraid."

But it's not surprising that he has to say it. These were hard bitten, outdoor, rural, working men. Not the sort of people given to flights of fancy and wild imaginations. The kind of men who would have been much more into *Top Gear* than *Supernatural*. More into *Jason Bourne* than

Heroes. And they suddenly see this burst of light and voice in the middle of a dark February night. It must have been terrifying.

It's a good job that the angel restrains his whole heavenly choir from making themselves known until after he's let the shepherds settle down a bit.

The shepherds might be frightened. But both the lead angel and later the choir are absolutely clear though that the message that they are bringing, for angel is just another word for messenger, is a happy one.

"I bring you good news, of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

And the multitudes echo: *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."*

And when you stop and think about it this is all very strange. This announcement is made to a completely unlikely group of people.

Who would you normally announce a birth to? If you were a respectable tradesman like Joseph the carpenter you'd probably put a notice in the Echo. Maybe even in the Times.

And if you were God? If you were announcing the arrival of your own son? The saviour? The king who would reign forever? If you were announcing the arrival of the greatest news in the history of humanity?

Well you probably wouldn't choose to invest all that angelic energy on a birth notice to a bunch of very regular working class men, whose profession had something of a reputation for dishonesty.

But God does announce it to them. Why?

Well both who God makes the announcement to and what he announces are something of a hint. A clue about what his gift to the world that first Christmas is all about.

Let's think first about the announcement. What is it? That a saviour has been born. That he is God's king (that's what Christ means) and that he will rule (that's what Lord means). We're also told that the arrival of this child means peace between men and God.

Some presents just have to be taken as a hint don't they. If you get a box of chocolates this Christmas it probably doesn't tell you very much. But if all your family buy you deodorant it probably tells you something about your personal hygiene that you need to reflect on. If your wife buys you this Christmas the book *How to iron your own damn shirt – the perfect*

husband guide. She may be trying to suggest something to you. You get the idea. There are just some gifts that make a statement. Odour Eaters. Diet books. Washing up brushes.

So if God says that the greatest news on earth for people is that he has sent a saviour who will bring peace between men and God what should that tell us?

Surely it tells us that at the moment there is not peace between us and God – that we are his enemies. Surely it tells us that we are in real trouble and that we need to be saved – we need to be rescued.

What God announces in those Palestinian fields is that the human race needs a rescuer – a rescuer from God. Someone who can make peace between us and God. And what God announces is that he has sent that rescuer. The Christ. The King. His Son.

But it's not just what God's gift is that tells us something important. It's also who the gift is announced to.

The angels announced that the good news about Jesus coming as a rescuer was "for all the people." Now I suppose God could have sent his angels to announce that to the royal court of King Herod. He could have sent them to the religious leaders of the day – the Pharisees and Saducees of the Jewish ruling council. He could even have sent the angels to the king of the known world – the Emperor Octavian in Rome. But doing that it would have rather undermined the point wouldn't it?

Sending the angels to those people would be like telling the people in the executive boxes at Anfield that the club owners wanted to come and meet some regular, average football fans. It would be like announcing free university places for normal people during the school assembly at Eton college.

The angels announce the coming of Jesus to regular men because they are exactly the kind of people he has come to rescue. Normal people. Ordinary people. People who mess up and do wrong and who know that they need a saviour to be right with God.

God's message to the shepherds tells us three vital things:

- We need a rescuer
- God has sent one
- The rescuer is for anyone

The shepherds respond joyfully to the good news. They leave their sheep, leg it down the road to Bethlehem and find everything just as the angels said.

Not the nicely Dettoxed stable of our nativity scenes with a couple of docile animals and some tumble dried hay. But a smelly, dark regular stable with a new born baby – still, no doubt, a bit purple and blue in the limbs and looking a bit squished round the head and face as all newborns do.

The shepherds were amazed and went and told everybody, not because this was an extraordinary scene. It was a very ordinary scene. Maybe even a depressingly ordinary scene – a teenage mother, a vulnerable baby. A proud but probably fairly incompetent young dad. No money. No facilities. Just some hope and a makeshift cot.

If there hadn't been an announcement you'd assume this was just another regular Jewish boy destined for a quiet but respectable life of joinery like his Dad.

The shepherds were amazed **because there had been an announcement**. The angels had appeared and told them that this ordinary child, in an ordinary stable, with ordinary parents was, in reality, the Christ child. God's king. The creator of the universe enfolded in a garment of baby soft skin.

The shepherds glorified and praised God not because they had seen something spectacular. But because the ordinary thing they had seen was the most extraordinary event in the history of the world. It was the arrival of the saviour of the human race. And they, like his mother, were filled with wonder.

There was much more to come. Mary almost certainly sat down with Dr Luke and told him about the events of that night. Luke's carefully researched work will have been based on her eyewitness testimony. But she would see far more before this book was written. She would witness some of the miracles. She would hear Jesus' amazing teaching. She would see his death and know of his resurrection.

The shepherds hadn't yet seen the glorious end of the story. They did not know, as we can, that the way Jesus would rescue us and bring peace with God would be by bearing God's judgment in our place as he hung dying on a Roman cross. They did not know that he would prove he had exhausted God's wrath and defeated the power of the Devil by rising from the dead and ascending in glory to rule the universe forever.

But they knew that they had seen the saviour. And they knew that they believe in him. And so they rejoiced. So what about us?

You see I am not convinced that our problem at Christmas is that we eat and drink and are merry. I don't think our problem is fundamentally that we give children PS3s and X-boxes. I don't think there's

anything wrong with giving either champagne to your friends or goats to people you will never meet.

Our problem is not too much celebration. I think it is too little celebration. I don't think our problem is too much festive cheer. It is not enough.

For there are two ways to purchase and consume. One is the consumption that makes us feel alive because it distracts us from the inevitability of death.

That is the drinking that makes us happy because it blots out the pain or, better still, inoculates us from ever feeling it at all.

It is the family meal that makes us feel good because it enables us to escape our nagging guilt about the millions who starve, especially if we've already sent them a goat.

But that is not the celebration of the shepherds. That is not the celebration of a Christian Christmas.

The shepherds went back to their McJob. To the smell and the derision. They probably spent the rest of their lives doing that job. But they rejoiced. Not the joy of escapism. Not the joy of blotting out a dark and miserable world for a few hours or even a couple of days.

But the joy of looking a miserable and sad world full in the face and knowing that God has a plan. Knowing that God has sent a saviour. Knowing that saviour is Jesus and that all they needed to do to join in God's great rescue, to be right with him forever, was put their trust, their hope, their faith in Christ. This Christmas that is all we need to do too.

And that is something worth celebrating. That is a message, that if you believe it, will transform your Christmas.

If you are determined to celebrate Christmas as God intended, by trusting Jesus, it really matters very little whether your taste is for high art or low kitsch. For minimalist white LEDs or full colour decorating the house. For giving DVDs or giving to Darfur.

Because if you know the saviour who has come for all men you will shape your whole life, not just your Christmas, around celebrating God's saviour, doing good to others and, like the shepherds, spreading the good news of Jesus.

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