

Sermon for Sunday 31 December 2023 – The First Sunday of Christmas

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Isaiah 61.10–62.3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4.4-7; Luke 2.15–21

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

As I read the gospel passage for today, 'when the angels went away', my reaction was, wait, what angels? When the angels went away, what angels? And the shepherds said to one another... what shepherds? Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing. What thing?

'And they went with Haste and found Mary, Joseph and the baby lying in a manger.' Nevermore has a comma been so important in the English language, because if you don't put that comma in, it's not in the Greek, but if you don't put the comma in, it looks like you've got three in a bed!

'But they saw Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger and they made known what had been told them.' Wait, what's been told? It's though we have a fragment here without the information. What angels? What thing? What did they say? What had been told to them? Now, Luke opens his gospel, explaining to Theophilus, who was probably his benefactor, that he was going to make an orderly account of the good news of Jesus Christ, from eyewitness testimony. He's telling Theophilus, in an orderly way, what he says Theophilus has already known about; probably in about 60 AD or CE, if we're going to use the modern theme, the common era.

Before we make 21st century application, as I often say, we have to understand what Luke was trying to communicate to Theophilus and anyone else who got to read the account. And Luke locates his account in history. Now, writing history at that time was a little bit different; you could use a little bit of licence with what you wrote, whereas now we'd be very particular about the accuracy, but they had reasons for the way they wrote.

So Luke locates his account in history. He starts off in the time of Herod, and then we have the account of Zechariah and the encounter with Gabriel. It's in the political context of the time. And also Luke, throughout his gospel, seems keen to link back to the Old Testament. So we're going to look this morning at what we might find about the historical context, the political context, and Luke linking back to the Old Testament.

But we have a slight problem. We only have, at the moment, the bit that we read this morning. We don't know about the angels, we don't know what they said, and we don't know what this thing is that they talked about. So it's New Year's Eve, last day of 2023; shall we have a quiz? Simon was worried when he saw this, that it's a 16 point sermon. There's 16 points with several sub points. So we'll be here till next Tuesday.

So what people say, okay, your starter for ten. Who are the characters that have been introduced in the bit that comes before the gospel section that we read today? Who are the characters that have been introduced? No cheating, but a little clue, it's all in the first hymn we sang of 'While shepherds', but no looking it up and no googling. Who are the characters that have been introduced?

Just shout it out. Shepherds. Who else? Sheep. Shepherds and sheep. Okay, yes, they were looking after their sheep. Fair enough.

The angel of the Lord. There's quite an interesting point about the angel of the Lord. Who appeared to Zechariah? Angel of the Lord. Called to Mary? Angel of the Lord... Gabriel; to the shepherds, Angel of the Lord. Not Gabriel. Gabriel is not introduced here. And I think it's really interesting that he also says the glory of **the Lord** shone around. The glory of the Lord speaks of the presence of God. And in the Old Testament, and this is where we're linking to the Old Testament, the phrase angel of the Lord very often meant God himself, particularly if it talks about his presence, the glory of the Lord. Think about Moses of the burning bush; angel of the Lord. And then it's God spoke.

The only time in the Old Testament where we have God, his presence, and the other characters that were introduced in this reading, who are the other characters that are introduced? We have the angel of the Lord. Who appears after the angel of the Lord has spoken? Lots of angels, the heavenly host, where do we get that? Yes, angels.

The only time in the Old Testament where you have God and the heavenly host together; and I was quite shocked when I discovered this. Any guesses? The giving of the law on Mount Sinai, the start of God's covenant with his people, what we know as the old covenant. And I wonder whether Luke is trying to say here, angel of the Lord, not referring to Gabriel, but by saying that it is the glory of God's presence as well, that this was God himself, with his heavenly host, announcing what we now know as the new covenant. I'll just leave that thought with you.

What happens? The angel of the Lord turns up and the shepherds are... sore afraid; terrified; frightened. And the angels say, 'do not be afraid'. Then what does the angel say? How many of you are trying to sing 'While shepherds' in your heads at the moment? Glad tidings. I bring good news. Evangelion. The gospel. Literally, I gospel you. I bring good news to you. Who's the good news for? Everybody. All the people. What is that good news?

Now think 'While shepherds'. Where? In the city of David. Interesting, the city of David. But we're talking Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. I wonder why? Anyone got the answer to that question? Let me know afterwards over coffee. So, born in the city of David. What? Who? Saviour? Who is Christ the Lord?

And then what does the angel say 'Do not be afraid'. He says that there's a saviour born in David's city, Christ the Lord. And 'This shall be the sign'. And what's the sign? Some of you are more mature than me; another way of saying olde; you've had more Christmases to learn this. A sign - baby; swaddling clothes; manger.

I was telling Simon and Maureen a bad sort of vicar type joke before the service; they didn't appreciate it. But another one for you is, how did Mary know the weight of baby Jesus? There was away in the manger.

Now this lying in a manger, now, it's become a bad Christmas tradition here that I bang on about. It was not a lonely stable out the back of some pub on the highway. This would have been in the family home. Joseph and Mary would have rucked up. It says that Jesus was born during the time that she was in Bethlehem. Please take out of your mind the idea that they arrived on a donkey, they're going around Bethlehem trying to find somewhere to stay on the night that Jesus was born. No, they went to Bethlehem. They spent some time there and during that time was time to give birth to Jesus.

It was an honour based culture. You could ruck up like I probably could in Liverpool and go, I'm the third cousin twice removed of Fred down the road and said, come in, have a cup of tea. It was expected that you showed hospitality. The idea that there wasn't room in the guest room for the birth is just... The women would have gathered round and been the midwives, they needed some space. Or maybe there were others who'd got there first and were being shown hospitality as well.

So what then happened... Be a sign; manger; swaddling clothes. We have multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God. And what did they say? Last verse of 'While shepherds'; 'Glory to God in the highest'. And what on earth? 'Peace with who he's favoured'. We managed all the answers. 16 out of 16. You've done well.

I said that Luke links the Old Testament into the birth of Jesus. I really do wonder whether this was God. That Luke is saying God announced on Sinai the covenant with his people Israel. And here he is coming and visiting shepherds to announce the birth of the Messiah; it just intrigues me.

But I also said that Luke is being political. This is what was written about Caesar Augustus; 9 BC. And we believe the birth of Jesus was somewhere around 6 to 4 BC. 'Whereas the providence that ordains our whole life has established with zeal and distinction that which is most perfect in our life, by bringing Augustus, who she filled with virtue as a benefaction to all humanity, sending to us and to those after us, a Saviour; who put an end to war, [translated, brought peace] and brought order to all things, the birth of God was the beginning of good tidings. Evangelion, Gospel, to the world through him.' Let that sink in a minute.

Written about Caesar Augustus, a Saviour who brought peace to the whole world by his birth. And here Luke lands this bombshell. No, it's not Caesar who is the Saviour. It's not Caesar who brings peace, because he did that by subjecting people to oppression and taxing them. And it's not Caesar that brings good news for the whole world. It is the Messiah born as a baby in humble circumstances in Bethlehem.

That's tantamount to treason, stating that. I don't know about you, but it doesn't surprise me that when the shepherds went to Bethlehem and they found a baby and they told everything that they had been told, that everyone listening was amazed that this baby was going to be the Saviour and bring peace; not

through war, not through oppression, but through the suffering of the cross. The shepherds saw, the shepherds were amazed and those they told were amazed. The shepherds then went and told others and they returned, glorifying God.

I'm not very much into New Year's resolutions, but I think a good New Year's resolution might be for this coming year that we, as God's people seek to see, to allow ourselves to be amazed and in response, to tell others and to glorify God.

Amen.