

Prayers

Opening prayer

What a privilege it is, dear Father, to rejoice in the birth of Your Son! What a joy it is to be able to celebrate it with joy and thanksgiving in our churches and homes! What an honour to be touched by Your gracious hand and lifted into heavenly places to rejoice with the angels! Dear Father; may the wonder of Christmas never leave us; old or young: Alleluia!

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: CHRISTMAS

1. For yourself

Praise God for Jesus, and spend time doing this in whatever way you are led. Give Him glory and honour from the depths of your heart.

2. For your friends and family

Pray in thanksgiving for those members of your family who you have been with this Christmas, and pray especially for those you have not seen. Pray for the day when all your family will know and love the Lord.

3. For the church and its work

Thank God for the many special events and services held by your church this Christmas. Pray that God will speak through them, and pray for all those who have been touched by them.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for all who have been the subject of 'news' these past few days. Pray for those who do not yet know that Jesus has come to earth for them and for their salvation.

Meditation

I heard a voice say; 'Go to Bethlehem and see the child.'

And I hesitated. What if I was hearing things?

But my spirit was led to the child in the stall,

And I was captivated; Christ was born in my heart.

I heard a voice say; 'Glory to God in highest heaven!'

And I said 'what?' I didn't have a clue what it meant!

But my spirit was consumed by heavenly praise,

And I was transported into realms of amazing joy.

I heard a voice say; 'Come follow me ...'

And I didn't know what to do. Was the choice really mine?

But Jesus took hold of my faint hearted hand

And I was blessed beyond measure by His care.

I heard a voice say; 'Give me Your all!'

And I said 'why?' Why give back what you have been given?

But the Christ within me was speaking from the Cross

And He had given His all for me. So I knew what to do.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Luke 2:8-14

⁸ *There were shepherds out in the fields of that neighbourhood, keeping watch by night over their flock. ⁹ An angel of the Lord came and stood by them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them,*

'Do not be afraid; look, I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ for today in the city of David, a Saviour has been born for you, and He is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in cloth bands and lying in a manger.'

¹³ *Suddenly there was a great company of the heavenly host together with the angel, praising God and saying,*

¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace amongst those he loves!'

Review

This part of the story of the first Christmas is such a simple story, yet its words have said so much to so many throughout the ages. The shepherds were ordinary folks, going about their daily lives, and in this case, lives of hardship and toil. Yet they were the first to be told about the Good News of God and the birth of the Messiah!

It is as if the whole of heaven was bursting at the seams with joy that at last, God's plan for the salvation of the world had begun! On most of the occasions in the Old Testament when an angel appeared to someone, as in the stories of Abraham (Genesis 16:7f. 22:11f.) it is quite unclear at times whether it is God himself who has appeared, or an angelic being acting as His representative. Certainly, when this passage talks about the appearance of 'the angel of the Lord', the message delivered is God's message, and this is confirmed by the appearance of the 'glory of the Lord' (2:9). What a sight! Even Moses (Exodus 33:18ff) had to have his face hidden by the hand of God from the sight of His 'glory'. The word 'glory' refers to the visible evidence of the greatness of God, and it is something which can barely be described except by means of spiritual superlatives which are hard to tie down to any worldly experience. Amazingly, the shepherds were the first people to see God in all His 'Glory', in other words, to see God truly for Himself! This was not for them a story to tell, but an experience to live with for the rest of their lives. We must be thankful to God that they told others, and this wonderful part of the story of Jesus' birth has been handed down to us.

Some will say that the story had to have such a revelation. Well, of course, but there is no reason to doubt this or think of it as some fairy tale. We are dealing with truth because ultimately, only truth is capable of supporting the whole story of how God changed the world through the saving power of His Christ, the child born at Bethlehem. Behind the scenes of what could be physically seen, I believe that God was excited too, and there is no reason why we cannot talk about God in the same way we talk about people, because God has made us in 'His image' (Gen 1:26,7) and we are therefore entitled to think that He is like us, but infinitely more glorious and perfect! The birth of His Son was something He wanted to show to others, and in the event, He gave the message in all His 'Glory' to the nearest workmen on the scene, the shepherds (2:8)!

When the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds, the first words spoken were 'do not be afraid'. This is the commonest form of greeting made to men or women when visited by angels (see), and we may assume that this message comes from the very heart of God Almighty. In this instance, however, the words have a new meaning. Now that God has brought His Son into the world, the time when God and people were permanently separated by a gulf of sin was drawing to a close. The glory of what the angel said was that God's heart was now open to all people, because 'today, in the city of David, a Saviour has been born for you, and He is the Messiah, the Lord!' (2:11). It is surely amazing that God should reveal Himself in all His glory to humanity on that first Christmas night, and He did it to menial labourers who were enduring the hard and demanding work of sleeping in shifts during the night to look after flocks of sheep. If He was excited to reveal Himself to them, He is just as keen to show Himself to us today through His Son Jesus Christ; 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace amongst those he loves!' (1:14)

I know from what people have told me as a Christian minister that many people have experiences of God which are powerful and real to them but they do not understand them. Sometimes they have tried to explain these experiences to others, perhaps even to other ministers or priests, but they have been rebuffed because their story has no place in the theological understanding of the person they have talked to. I dearly wish this were not the case, but I have heard stories like this too often. I wonder what reception the shepherds would receive if they told their story to a priest or church elder today, for example. I would hope their story would be accepted, but I am not optimistic.

I pray that the Lord will break down the barriers which prevent ordinary people, the Shepherds of our day, from pursuing the leads of revelation which the Lord freely gives to people even today. God bless the 'Shepherds', those to whom God has shown Himself, wherever they are!

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Who were the shepherds and why were they regarded as dishonest?
- The coming of God's glory. What does it mean?
- The sign of the child
- The heavenly host singing praises!

Notes on the translation of the passage

V10 'I bring you good news of great joy for all the people'

Other translations:

'I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people' (NIV)

'I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people' (NRSV)

The main question to be answered about this text is whether the Greek word for people here ('laos') refers to all people including Gentiles, or just the people of Israel who were expecting the Messiah. It is true that Luke's Gospel is beginning to speak about the universal message of salvation, but here in this part of the story, it seems that the coming of the Messiah is good news primarily for those who are expecting Him, that is, the Jews.

V11 'Saviour'

Strangely, the word 'Saviour', though thoroughly well known to Christians, was not used much in the New Testament, where there are only thirteen uses of the word; of these, six are found in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus. The idea of the Messiah as the Saviour of God's people comes largely from the Old Testament where there are another 42 references to 'Saviour'. Many of these are either in the Psalms (e.g. Psalms 42:11, 65:5), or in Isaiah (43:3,11, 45:15,21, etc.).

V11 'Christ, the Lord'

Most translations have this phrase 'Christ the Lord', but this disguises the fact that this expression is extremely rare, and found just this once here in the Gospels (see also 2 Cor 4:5 and Phil 2:11). The Greek reads '*Christ Lord*', in which the word 'Christ' means 'the Anointed One', or the Messiah, and the word 'Lord' is a word pronounced by devout Jews instead of the Holy Name of God, written JHWH. There would be good reason to translate this phrase; '*He is both the Messiah and God*'. In other words, the Messiah is in fact God Himself. This was news the Jews would not have expected, because they thought the Messiah was an agent of God. Even in Jesus' day, they had not taken on board the message of Isaiah that the Servant was indeed God Himself come to earth as '*Immanuel*', God with us.

Who were the shepherds and why were they regarded as dishonest?

We naturally think positively of shepherds today, without realising that they were not regarded highly in Jesus' day. Problems arose with shepherds because land and livestock owners were suspicious that they used the advantages of their position to eat some of the sheep in their care, and then blaming the loss on wild animals; this is why they had a reputation as thieves! Moreover, this issue is not just incidental to Scripture. In Ezekiel 34, the prophet Ezekiel has a similar problem but it is related to the spiritual life of God's people; he castigates the 'shepherds of Israel' (meaning the priests) for 'eating the sheep' (Ez 34:2f.)!

It is worth mentioning another theory about the shepherds here. Because the sheep were being kept on the hillsides, this means it was summer/autumn time (April to November). During the colder months of the year, the sheep and goats (largely indistinguishable in those days) were kept in homesteads and also in caves attached to dwelling places; indeed, something very like the place described as the birthplace of Jesus. Is it possible that Jesus was born and placed in an empty 'manger' because the sheep were on the hillside for seasonal reasons?

These theories also help us with an intriguing fact of history. An ancient tradition of the church is that Jesus was born in a cave attached to a homestead, and this is mentioned by the second century writer Origen, for example. There are records of the erection of a shrine to the god Adonis over a cave in Bethlehem during the reigns of Emperors Hadrian and Decius, and this strongly implies that the site was holy to Christians in the third century (otherwise the Romans would not have attempted to rededicate it to Adonis). Then, in the fourth century, the newly converted Emperor Constantine constructed a basilica over the site of this shrine and cave, and the ruins of this basilica now lie underneath the present day Church of the Nativity in

Bethlehem. It is not at all fanciful to suggest that this site was indeed the place where Jesus was born, even if it was a cave underneath the place currently venerated in the Church of the Nativity.

Putting all this together, some have suggested that the shepherds knew where to go to find the baby Jesus because the cave where he was born was the place where the sheep they guarded in the summer would overwinter! This may well be stretching the evidence too far. However, there is no doubt that the shepherds were the poorest and lowest of slaves in Jewish society, yet God chose to reveal to them the glories of His salvation. The social standing of a person does not determine their state of salvation or need for it, thanks be to God!

The coming of God's glory. What does it mean?

In this passage, it is as if the whole of heaven bursts with joy that at last, the glory of God's plan for the salvation of the world has begun! On most of the occasions in the Old Testament when an angel appears to someone, as in the stories of Abraham (Genesis 16:7f. 22:11f.) it is quite unclear whether it is God himself who has appeared, or an angelic being acting as His representative. Certainly, when this passage describes the appearance of 'the angel of the Lord', the message delivered is God's message, which is confirmed by Luke's report of the appearance of the 'glory of the Lord' (2:9).

In the Old Testament, the 'glory of the Lord', or the 'glory of God' was regarded as a specific entity; it was God's personal presence, which for centuries had dwelt in the Tabernacle and then the Temple (see Exodus 40:34). Jewish people spoke of God's 'Shekinah' glory coming into the 'Holy of Holies' in the form of a cloud (see also 2 Chronicles 5:13,14). This 'Shekinah' glory of God was His presence on earth with His people (from the Hebrew 'shakan' meaning 'to dwell'). Now this theory held good as long as Solomon's Temple stood and the Ark of the Covenant was kept within the Holy of Holies in the central sanctuary of the Temple. However, when the Babylonians ransacked the Temple in 587BC, the entire Temple was laid waste and its sacred objects were utterly destroyed. When the Jewish people went into Exile, their sad cry was that God's Shekinah glory had left them! When the exiles returned to Jerusalem around 40 years later on (Ezekiel 29:11 etc.), they did indeed build a new temple, but some felt that once the Ark had been destroyed, the Shekinah glory of God did not return. Certainly, Herod built a magnificent new Temple in the years before Jesus was born, but strict Jews were divided about whether it could be said to be a fitting place for the dwelling of God's 'glory'.

With this history then, it is remarkable that Luke announces with great bravado, that '*the glory of the Lord shone round about them*' (2:9). We read these words with awe today, but we can hardly imagine what they meant to an Israelite of those times. This was an announcement that the Shekinah glory of God, absent from Israel since the sacking of Jerusalem six hundred years previously, was now present in Israel! The glory that shone around the shepherds was the same glory that shone from Moses' face when he had met with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:29f.!) This was the same glory of the Lord that people believed would kill those who saw it even by accident! No wonder the shepherds were fearful!

The sign of the child

The shepherds were asked to verify their radically new experience of God by going to Bethlehem to find the child 'lying in a manger'. We will read tomorrow about what happened when the shepherds went to find the child, but for today, we must look at why God asked the shepherds to do this. Would they have believed that the birth of a child was the sign of God's Messiah?

It is impossible to know the answer to this. It seems that the scholars of the day were aware of the prophecy in Micah that said the Messiah would be born of the tribe of Ephrathites in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:2f.), but there was a wider principle at stake. Many of the major steps in the development of the life of Israel were linked to the birth of a child, and it does not take a scholar to work this out. The evidence of this is in the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah in their old age (Genesis 21), the birth of Moses to a Levite man and woman (Exodus 2:1f.), the birth of Samson to Manoah and his wife (Judges 13:20f.) and the birth of Samuel to Hannah and Elkanah. It is a fair assumption that God had inspired Isaiah to his famous prophecy '*a virgin will conceive and bear a child*' (Isaiah 7:14) through these famous Biblical events in Israel's ancient history. It is doubtful that these shepherds would have perceived all the connections between these prophecies and therefore been convinced by the birth of a child that God was doing a new work. However, it is quite reasonable to suggest that they may have had a sufficient understanding of this for God to make all this clear to them once they saw the Christ child in the manger.

We often think that the shepherds would have believed that God was doing some great work simply because the finding of a child verified what they were told on the hillside. This may just be too simplistic an explanation of what was going on.

The heavenly host singing praises!

In Greek, the phrase the 'great company of the heavenly host' (2:13) includes the term for 'army'! So, here is God's army proclaiming peace! This in itself is a remarkable event, unique in history and one of the most dramatic of moments in the entire story. Most of us have wondered what it can possibly be like to stand on a hillside, and watch the hosts of heaven sing praise to God and announce peace!

We must be careful not to be carried away without paying attention to what is going on, however. This great angelic assembly is both army and choir, and this has considerable meaning when we consider that the announcement is not of something finished but a prophecy about what will be achieved. In verse 14, the heavenly host praised God, as we might expect; though please note that the Scripture does not say that they were singing, merely that they were 'saying' praises. This hardly makes a difference to the story, perhaps only to our perception of it, but the next point is more important.

The words of the heavenly host are in fact prophetic; 'peace amongst those He loves' was not achieved by the birth of Christ, it was won on the Cross at Calvary, when Jesus died for our sins and was subsequently raised from the dead. The words of this proclamation are God's intent to do the work of salvation, and something to be declared to people on earth. It is like saying 'God means business and will do what He is intent upon doing, which is to repair His relationship with His people through the Messiah.

Discipleship

Application

Yet again, this story is no fairy tale. The more we look at it, the more we find that we are dealing with truth because ultimately, only truth is capable of supporting the whole story of how God changed the world through the saving power of His Christ, the child born at Bethlehem. Behind the scenes of what could be physically seen, I believe that God was excited too, and there is no reason why we cannot talk about God in the same way we talk about people, because God has made us in 'His image' (Gen 1:26,7). He is like us, but infinitely more glorious and perfect, and this is why the birth of His son is reasonable. God wanted us to see what He is like, and we see Him first in the form of a baby! The birth of His Son was something He wanted to show to others, and in the event, He gave the message in all His 'Glory' to the nearest workmen on the scene, the shepherds (2:8)!

I know from what people have told me as a Christian minister that many people have experiences of God, which are powerful and real to them, but they do not find it easy to understand what has happened to them. Sometimes such people have tried to explain their experiences to others, perhaps even to ministers or priests, but they have been rebuffed because their story has no place in the theological understanding of those they have spoken to. How tragic, and I dearly wish this were not the case, but I have heard stories like this too often. I often wonder what reception the shepherds would have received if they told their story to a priest in their own day. I reckon they would have been 'laughed out of court' as it were, just as people can be today. However, the story has persisted and we celebrate it at Christmas most probably because their story was remembered by Mary and passed on in later years, once the significance of Jesus became known.

We should pray that the Lord will break down the barriers which prevent ordinary people, the shepherds of our day, from pursuing the inspiration and revelation which the Lord freely gives to them today. God bless the 'shepherds', those to whom God has shown Himself, wherever they are!

Questions for groups

1. What does this passage of Scripture tell us about the coming of Jesus into the world, and about God's salvation?
2. In what ways does the Lord gloriously reveal Himself to people today, particularly people who are not Christians?
3. How important is it for us to hear God's message as being one of 'peace', and what does this mean?

Discipleship challenges

- *Look back on those times when the Lord has appeared to you in some way. Has this been strange or has it been ordinary? Now consider how the Lord might need to appear to you today in order to make you sit up and take notice! What would it take to make you change what you are doing and give attention to something completely different?*

- *Pray for the church and pray that the message of Christmas will not be forgotten now that the church 'calendar' moves on in the New Year. Make a New Year's resolution to remember some feature of the Christmas story from now until Easter*
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Final Prayer

Thank You Lord God that we have all been born as children, and we have grown and been brought up through infancy and youth. We praise You that this was right for Your Son Jesus as well, and we ask You to help us value our childhood and youth through which we learned so much: AMEN
