

Reflection: Sunday 31st Dec, 2023

Christmas 1: Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3; Luke 2: 15-21

I wonder how you picture the story of the nativity. It is so well known, and you'll have seen many a quaint Christmas Card representation, which can lead us to not really paying attention to the story at all. The story about

shepherds on their way to Bethlehem, for example, might look like the picture to the right. A few men, in silhouette, walking calmly towards the town with their crooks, and a



few little lambs at their feet as the bright light of the angel host is there in the background.

But that is not at all what Luke's gospel describes. The description of the angelic visit to the shepherds is the third appearance of angels and archangels, all of which resulted in fear: both Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist and Mary were confused by the appearance of the Angel Gabriel. And now the shepherds find the angel of the lord standing before them - and they were terrified.

Imagine for a moment that you are shepherd, on a hill, at night. In the stillness you are accustomed to every sound- you know the footfall of each of your companions, you know the sound of the sheep breathing, you know the different call of each night bird, the rustle in undergrowth that precedes a predator's attack. You know exactly what to expect from the landscape, the soundscape, and the night sky.

And suddenly-without warning- this unearthly, incredible, indescribable creature- this person- this presence- is filling the whole hillside with God's glory, standing right there in front of you and you'd never heard a sound- not had half a second's warning of his coming. It must have been like a bomb going off. And they are terrified. The glory of the Lord shines around them and it's no wonder that the angel has to calm them down by saying "Do not fear". But that's not a very good Christmas card greeting, is it?



Everything about this story is shot through with hugely upturned expectations, lives thrown out of sequence, one thing after the next being up-ended. Last week Carol talked about how Mary's life plan was completely changed by that visit from the angel, and not, on the face of it, for the better.

For the shepherds too, this is a complete upturning of their normal routines. These are rough, uneducated, and possibly rather smelly animal herders who haven't had a wash in weeks. They are very close to the bottom of the social scale, and yet they are the ones to whom the birth of the saviour is announced by the angel.

Perhaps – for the shepherds- the very lowliness of Jesus is the greatest miracle of all. Because if he has been born in poverty, placed in a manger, then he is like them- and they can go and see him. It is POSSIBLE, if he has been born humbly, that they can visit him, as they surely would not have been able to if he had appeared in a palace.

So, we are told that they go to Bethlehem with great haste- their faith in what they have heard and their eagerness to see all that they have been told of breaks through any reservation they might have about arriving, unannounced at the place where a young woman, unknown to them, has just given birth.

They run to welcome the little child- and, because they have heard about this humble messiah, they also run in the hope that they will receive a welcome. In the announcement of Christ's birth to the shepherds, Luke introduces us to the idea that Jesus welcomes the outsider and the stranger, and the outcasts become the honoured guests.

So, we can see this announcement as a great blessing not only to the shepherds themselves but also to all those who wonder whether they are acceptable- clean enough, smart enough, Godly enough to be loved by God.

And if that is something you have ever wondered then do not be afraid- this little child was born for you, and welcomes you, whatever other people may say about you, and whatever you may inwardly say about yourself. “Do not be afraid” can be a good greeting in the context of approaching Jesus as we will do so soon in communion. Yes, he was born for you.

And there is more here- Mary and Joseph are 80 miles from Nazareth, their home. The child is not Joseph's and Mary must still be wondering what on earth has happened - placing the baby in the feed trough for a cow was not what she imagined she'd be doing at the birth of her child.

And so, the arrival of unimportant, uneducated, unacceptable shepherds in the centre of Bethlehem, where they're not welcome, with their tale of the heavenly host of angels in the sky praising God and proclaiming the great joy of the birth of Jesus, that must have been a great comfort, a great reassurance and a real blessing for Mary too – you see in the picture below that she is smiling and possibly feeling better than before the shepherds arrived.



We can sometimes see ourselves as a burden to others. Or you might sometimes see turning up to church as a burden to you. But often our mere presence- our simple turning up, is enough to give great encouragement and joy to people whom we might think of as those who do

not need us. We all need one another. We belong to one another. Each one of us is part of God's story; each one of us has a blessing to bring.

This Christmas so many of us need to hear that message from the angels "fear not", not only because of all the difficulties being faced externally in the world, but also because our fears can overwhelm us, divide us, prevent us from discovering the miracle that is taking place in our midst when we get together and hear the angels sing God's glory and tell us not to be afraid.

The coming of God is often unexpected, disruptive and surprising- as it was for Zechariah and Mary and the shepherds. But it is always good news.

Today Jesus invites us to embrace the blessing of our own poverty and difficulties in life. Pride, greed or covetousness can't bring happiness, and we must see ourselves not as a burden. Homeless shepherds become the first witnesses of the good news of Jesus. Perhaps it is because they are clinging to less that they have the room to see salvation, and the humility to go to Bethlehem and rejoice in Christ's presence.

So, what about you? You are part of God's story of love and a welcoming community for all. Can you find joy here, so that even as you welcome him, you too are welcomed by the Saviour and there is nothing to fear in this space.