

2016 will be remembered as the year of terrible suffering in the Middle-east in Syria, Iraq and the Yemen

Also a year of surprising and for many, disturbing political elections, Donald Trump in the USA, for many Brexit in UK

At the time Jesus was born, Israel was enduring a period of great turmoil. They had been under the jackboot of the Romans for about 60 years and in recent years they had been ruled more directly by the cruel tyrant Herod. Someone who would not think twice about having dozens of baby boys slaughtered in order to ensure that there was no rival claim to his power. It all sounds horribly familiar.

As Jesus grew up, he would know what it was to live under a dangerous oppressive, unjust, corrupt regime. The very reason he was born in Bethlehem was because the Roman emperor Caesar August had decided to take a census so that everyone was registered for tax purposes.

And then his parents had to flee to Egypt with him when he was a tiny baby in order to preserve his life.

As Jesus grew up there would be various revolutionary leaders who would try to gather together a group of followers to start a rebellion against the Romans, or their puppet king Herod.

And Jesus must often heard from his mother Mary the story of how the angel Gabriel had appeared to her and told her she was going to have a baby, who would be called Jesus and that he would be the Messiah, the King anointed by God to rescue his people who had been promised again and again down through the centuries. God had said that *he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.*”

So we might have expected Jesus himself to lead a great revolution against the Romans. Certainly many wanted him to.

Jesus did come to lead a revolution, but it would not be in the streets or with violence or military force or in order to win political power. He knew that the most important place of all for revolution was in the human heart. It is there that there needs to be regime change. As we have seen in recent years, tyrants can be overthrown, whether Saddam Hussein or Colonel Gaddafi or Mubarrak, but if there is no transformation for the human heart, if there is no overthrowing of sin, pride, selfishness, greed then any outward revolution would make little difference. Those countries which thought they had had successful revolutions have discovered this all too painfully. For the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

It is in the human heart that Jesus came to reign. And Christmas reminds us that God came to invade our hearts not with force, or fear, not with threats or clever manipulation, but with love. The angel Gabriel told Mary *You are highly favoured, you have found favour with God.* She was, if you like, one of God’s *favourites*. Later the angels would tell those very ordinary and often despised shepherds that this baby was God’s gift to *them*. God wanted to bless *them* with the gift of peace.

It is God's grace and God's love alone that can transform people's hearts and lives and through them transform the world. This is why God took the hugely risky step of becoming a tiny vulnerable baby. We know this to be true, otherwise we would not be here, celebrating the birth of Jesus 2000 years after the event.

However, the thing about God invading the world with love is that we can very easily defend ourselves against it. God won't force himself into our lives. This tiny baby in a manger shows us how much God loves us. But it is up to us as to how we respond.

Will you be like Herod, and try to ensure he has no part of your life?

Or will you be like the innkeeper - simply not have room in your life to squeeze Jesus in?

Or will you be like Mary, like Joseph, like the shepherds and the wise men, and open your hearts to the babe of Bethlehem, the greatest Christmas gift of God's love and grace; to Jesus the one true king who can bring real change, beginning with you?

The choice is yours alone.

**<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'**

**<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,**

**<sup>14</sup> 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'**

**<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'**

**<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.**

**Reader      Blessed are you Christ our Saviour  
All            You lead us like a shepherd**

