



Revd Ro's Reflection on Christmas Day

Year A

Luke 2.1-14 [15-20]

This year I was able to organise the carol service held in Spital Chapel. Some parts of the original building of 1274 still survive. We were worshipping in a building that has seen almost eight hundred years of history. Everyone who comes recognises what they call the 'special' atmosphere of the holy place and it was wonderful to hold a carol service with singing for the first time since 2019. The service opened with these words:

'The fire burns bright tonight,
frost whispers, the sky is eager with stars;
listen, once more the story is being told.'

Certainly the chapel stood alone under a starry sky and the frost was deep and biting. It was a beautiful service and a joyful celebration of the birth of Jesus. One of the highlights was the wonderful carol, 'Silent Night' being sung to the guitar. It was a moving experience but for me it began a lot earlier than that.

I stood alone in the chapel about a month before the service, listening to Ellena and Joe as they rehearsed the carol. The chapel was empty, silent as they sang the age old story of the miracle of the incarnation God with us. The beauty of the music and the wonderful words of the simple carol made the glory of the Christmas story come alive. I was moved to tears and it will be a long time I suspect before I experience such a profound moment of stillness, peace and worship.

Listening to the carol in the service it was not so far away from the first time it was sung on Christmas Eve 1818 at St. Nicholas parish church in Oberndorf Austria. The awful Napoleonic wars had just come to an end and so there is an added deep poignancy to the line 'Sleep in heavenly peace'.

Father Joseph Mohr wrote the words to "Stille Nacht" in 1816 and two years later, brought the words to Franz Gruber the organist and asked him to compose a melody for it to be sung at that

night's mass. He did just that and it was sung for the first time to the guitar, making the carol at Spital so much more wonderful.

'Silent Night' tells of the nativity with a simplicity which really allows you to get to the heart of the story. The reading for today tells the story in its reality and, indeed, danger. We are so used to hearing it that maybe sometimes we forget just how tough this must have been for Mary, a young girl heavily pregnant with an awful journey to face.

^{2.1} 'In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.'

There is no avoiding it. They are living in a country overrun by a conquering power, an oppressive regime, and when Caesar commanded it, it was done without question. So the journey began and one can only imagine how difficult it must have been.

There is some question as to Quirinius and the date of this census. The known census was much later than Jesus' birth. However, a census was usually taken about every fourteen years. If that census is referred to then the date would be exactly right.

It was in Bethlehem, David's town, that Jesus was born. This place of his birth is important, we saw last week how Matthew began his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus, he was descended from the great King David as the prophets had foretold. Bethlehem was David's city and the town of Joseph's ancestors. The point is made clear if we look back to the opening of John's gospel and reflect once again on the enormity and wonder of the incarnation. God is becoming human, God is dwelling with us, human and divine. That is the stunning wonderful truth of Christmas. Not in a distant way but one of us, walking alongside us, born not in a palace but in the humblest place.

⁵ 'He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.'

Whatever specific place, stable or outhouse the Messiah was born in, it was humble. It is true of Jesus' life, think of Matthew 8.20. 'And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' The words 'there was no room for them at the inn' are vastly symbolic. It is about rejection. Once again think of John 1 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.'

Jesus, the saviour of the world, part of the Godhead but he is laid in hay in an outhouse. There would have been nobody there, just the tired animals, Joseph, his face full of worry and strain and the young girl lying on the straw and the faint wailing of a tiny baby seen dimly in the flickering light of a tiny lamp.

'Silent night, holy night!

All is calm, all is bright.

Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child.

Holy infant so tender and mild,

Sleep in heavenly peace,'

What must the feelings of Joseph and Mary have been? This is a special child, they had been told by Gabriel. Mary's child is of the Holy Spirit, she is the God bearer. It must have been almost too much to comprehend except for their absolute unshakable trust and faith. Now here was the reality, the tiny and vulnerable baby put into a manger of hay, wrapped in cloth against the cold and they were the protectors of the long awaited Messiah, theirs was the responsibility. They must have felt awestruck by the enormity of it all. Yet in another way, and it is captured beautifully in John Rutter's 'Candlelight Carol,' he is still their tiny baby.

'Godhead incarnate and hope of salvation is a child with his mother that first Christmas Day.'

I think that 'Silent Night' manages to capture the wonder and joy as well as the normality of the nativity.

'Silent night, holy night!

Shepherds quake at the sight.

Glories stream from heaven afar

Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia,

Christ the Saviour is born!'

Out on the lonely hillside the shepherds are watching their sheep as normal, these ordinary men are the first to hear the news of the birth of their King and Lord. Think of the people God chooses to reveal great truths to, think of those he chooses to serve him. You will end up with a list of the most unlikely candidates. It is to Mary Magdalen that God reveals the resurrection, a woman, who in Jewish culture could not give evidence in a court of law. Think of the disciples, and indeed of the great King David himself who was originally a humble boy born in Bethlehem. He had brothers, who on the surface were far more likely candidates for greatness. But it is David who is anointed by the prophet Samuel as the one who will be king.

Shepherds did not have a good reputation. They were looked down on. Yet God chose shepherds as the first witnesses to his Son's incarnation. Anyone reading Luke's gospel would not have missed the connection with David. David was a shepherd boy.

Jesus' often uses the image of the shepherd, indeed it is one of his great 'I am' sayings, John 10.

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.'

This makes quite clear what kind of shepherd Jesus was comparing himself to. There were bad shepherds, hence in part, the poor reputation. That metaphor holds so much of the life and death of Jesus. There is the promise too that the Gentiles are welcome in God's kingdom. 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.'

The angels appear to the shepherds on the hills above Bethlehem telling them the great news.

Naturally they are terrified but he utters the words that are so familiar. 'Do not be afraid.' This is exactly what the angel said to Mary and it is what Jesus says to the disciples after his resurrection.

What the shepherds do is an example to us all. They obey the call of the angels. They go to Bethlehem, they follow the very specific directions and they find Jesus.

¹⁵ 'When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.' There is no doubt they are the first to believe. What do they do about it? They witness, they tell people what they have seen.

¹⁷ 'When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.'

That is exactly our commission too. It is what the shepherd's began, the disciples continued, and generations have done through the ages. It is what we are called to do, to spread throughout the world the good news of Jesus Christ, God with us. It is indeed 'The greatest story ever told.' Just look at the joy that fills the shepherds. Our churches should be full of that wonder and joy.

We are left with a contemplative look at Mary, the young girl who 'treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.' She knows exactly who this child is. He is no self-styled god – in the vein of the Roman Emperor. No, this child is God. He is the only Lord to whom Christians will bow.

*'Shepherds and wise men will kneel and adore him
Seraphim round him their vigil will keep
Nations proclaim him their Lord and their Saviour
But Mary will hold him and sing him to sleep'* John Rutter

I think that really encapsulates the wonder of the incarnation and Mary's love and nurture of this tiny child who is God.

Jesus is the long awaited Messiah and those who see him with the eyes of faith will recognise him as the Son of God.

'Silent night, holy night!
Son of God love's pure light.
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth.'

May God bless you and I wish you all a very happy Christmas.

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