



Revd Ro's Reflection on Christmas Day and Christmas 1st week

Luke 2.1-21
Galatians 4.4-7

For Christmas Day we have a set of readings to choose from. One of them is the opening of St. John's Gospel which is stunning. There are no Christmas stories of the kind in the synoptic gospels here, verses 1-14 gives us a clear picture of the incarnation and so much more.

'The true light, which lightens everyone, was coming into the world.'

There is the sentence which states the fact that Jesus is the second person of the trinity. Not only present at the creation but active in it. The gospel of John tells us exactly who Jesus is,

'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God.'

God became human and dwelt among human beings, he brought God's word, he offered salvation to humanity, 'to all who received him, who believed in his name he gave the power to become children of God.

Look now at the epistle reading for Christmas I. Galatians 4.4-7

⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,
⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

⁶And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' ⁷So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.'

This is what Paul is saying exactly. We and all who believe in Jesus Christ as Son of God are children and heirs of God through Jesus. And isn't the next verse beautiful? 'And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'

The Spirit of God dwells within every one of us, close as our own breathing and we can call God Father. This is not just the formal address either, 'Abba,' was the informal loving address signifying closeness. In our language it would be, 'daddy'.

There we have the great truth of the incarnation wonderfully expressed by John in a few paragraphs. The more you study it the more is revealed, including of course the reference to John the Baptist.

The synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke do not approach the story in the same way. In this year's readings we have the narrative from Luke. Matthew mentions the birth in a short sentence after the visit of the angel to Joseph and goes on to the visit of the magi. Mark does not mention it at all but begins with John the Baptist and continues with Jesus' baptism at the Jordan.

It is in Luke that we have the full account. We have seen in the readings over the past weeks how Luke deals with the foretelling of the birth of John to Zechariah, the annunciation, Mary's meeting with her cousin Elizabeth and the wonderful song of Mary, 'The Magnificat.'

Now the stage is set for the birth. Luke is quite specific about the facts, in the opening sentence he says,

¹ 'In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This 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.'

Last week we looked at the tradition, in Isaiah, that the Messiah would be 'of the house and lineage' of the great King David. Isaiah has this theme, running throughout his writings that the great King, the saviour, would come again to rule not just Palestine but the world. This great King will be the Messiah. This is encapsulated in the great passage in chapter 9 of Isaiah, in Set 1, of the readings for Christmas Day.

'For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.'

Luke begins by telling of the registration. He is quite specific; Jesus was born in the reign of the Emperor Augustus. Augustus was the son of Julius Caesar, after the murder of Caesar there followed a time of bloody civil war. Mark Anthony has committed suicide and Augustus has all the power, He united the Empire, he proclaimed his father a god and himself as the self-styled, 'son of god.' Hence the cult of Emperor Worship was established.

An emperor would order a census to be taken throughout his dominions to ascertain who should be paying tax and who was available for conscription into the Roman army. Jews were exempt from service in the army so the purpose of this one was taxation. Each man was required to go back to the town of his birth. In this case Joseph returned to Bethlehem. The fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem was vitally important. King David was born in Bethlehem.

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. Quirinius was not governor then but did hold a position of authority. If that census is referred to then the date would be exactly right.

It was in Bethlehem, David's town, then that Jesus is born. This place of his birth is important, 'the maker of the stars and sea, become a child on earth for me,' as Betjeman's poem says. 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. 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. This was the hallmark of Jesus' life and it is the pattern for ours.

²⁴ When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. ²⁵ But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ²⁶ It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' Matthew 20

It is summed up in that beautiful hymn, 'The Servant King.'

'From heaven you came helpless babe, entered our world your glory veiled; not to be served but to serve, and gave your life that we might live.'

This also captures the bittersweet nature of Christmas in that the cross is in the cradle. I once received a Christmas card that summed this up. It was a simple nativity in silhouette. The beams that supported the stable roof were in the shape of a cross and behind that was the light, not of the star but of a rising sun, the resurrection.

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.' 'There is no room for them at the inn' is 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. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.'

But there were some who did accept him. And to them he would give the power to become God's children by adoption.

And who were the first ones? Shepherds! 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 think of the great King David himself. Who was David? 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. What was David's job? he was a humble 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.'

We think too of Psalm 23. In this case it is, 'The Lord (who) is my shepherd.'

Here God is being compared to the good shepherd who cares for his flock and thinks of them as his children.

'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.'

I remember when 'The bible comes to life exhibition' came to Tamworth. One evening was given over to, 'The Shepherd's Psalm.'

A man was dressed as a shepherd and explained each verse. It is fascinating. It is the image of the biblical shepherd who leads his sheep from the front. They follow because they trust and love him, because he cares for their every need.

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. 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; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The 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, and what we are called to do; spread throughout the world, the good news of Jesus Christ, God incarnate. It is indeed 'The greatest story ever told.' Just look at the joy that fills the disciples. Our churches should be full of that wonder and joy.

And Mary, we are left with a contemplative look at 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.

I think one of my favourite carols is John Rutter's candlelight carol. It is so for so many reasons but I just love this wonderful verse,

*'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'*

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

The baby receives the name Jesus, as Gabriel instructed and is circumcised in accordance with Jewish law. That is not an incidental detail; it is included by Luke because he is emphasising Jesus as a Jew who lives by the law and the prophets and is the fulfilment of it. Jesus is the long awaited Messiah whom those who see him with the eyes of faith will recognise as the Son of God.

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

*'Candlelight, angel light, firelight and star-glow,
Shine on his cradle till breaking of dawn.
Gloria! Gloria in excelsis deo
Angels are singing; the Christ child is born.'* John Rutter

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