



## Revd Ro's Reflection on Christmas Day 2021 Year C

**Luke 2. 1-14 [15-20]**

***'Joy to the world the Lord has come.'***

Although we are still living through very worrying times we can share Christmas together. Last year mum and I sat alone in Spital chapel as we shared Christmas Day Holy Communion. There was a tremendous atmosphere of peace and tranquillity and the presence of the Holy Spirit was tangible. This year I will be taking the service in fellowship with a congregation once more.

The reading I am looking at this year is the Christmas story. The other reading set is the stunning opening of St. John's gospel but this is the gospel reading for Christmas 2 so I will look at it in detail then. Last week the gospel reading concentrated on the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth. It was infused with joy as both women worshipped God, thanking him for the gift of their special sons. I said then that Mary's life was to be a tough one. Now Mary, Joseph and the whole populace are summoned to take part in the Roman Census. I have just been sent a Christmas card which shows the Holy family on their long journey, tiredness and endurance is etched into every feature.

Joseph has to journey to Bethlehem because he is a descendent of David. Mary is heavily pregnant; she has to make a journey of around ninety miles over rough terrain to reach the city. 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 civil war. Mark Anthony committed suicide and Augustus had 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. The fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem was vitally important. King David was born in Bethlehem; Jesus is of David's line as the promised Messiah would be.

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 then, David's city, that Jesus is born. If we think back to the opening of St. John's gospel we can reflect once again on the awe-inspiring wonder of the incarnation. God is becoming human, Emmanuel. God is dwelling with us. That is the stunning wonderful truth of Christmas. He is not distant but one of us, 'the maker of the stars and sea, become a child on earth for me,' as Betjeman's poem says. God is walking alongside humanity, born not in a palace but in the humblest place. This was the hallmark of Jesus' life and it is the pattern for ours.

I have in the past made the connection that Spital was once in its history a stable but became a Holy place as did that stable in Bethlehem. The transformation of that stable comes through the birth of Jesus. As UA Fanthorpe puts it in her poem B.C/A.D

'And this was the moment  
When a few farm workers and three  
Members of an obscure Persian sect  
Walked haphazard by starlight straight  
Into the kingdom of heaven.'

Those last two lines are some of the most beautiful I know.

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.' That there is no room for them at the inn' is vastly symbolic. It is about rejection. Once again think of John 1: <sup>10</sup> 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>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.

Think of the ones who are the first to hear the 'glad tidings' humble shepherds out on the hillside. Shepherds were regarded as somewhat disreputable but the angels appear to them. These people don't live in luxury; they are poor and uneducated. But think of those great figures in Jewish history who were shepherds, Abraham, Moses and the greatest King, David. Of course Jesus is to become the Good Shepherd of his flock. God is spoken of as a shepherd in Psalm 23.

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

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;

<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.'

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 angel says next is not equivocal in any way.

'I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'

This child then is the long awaited Messiah, this is the one sent from God to bring in his new creation and to be the ruler of the world.

<sup>12</sup> 'This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'

<sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

The point about the manger was not just that it was the humblest place for the King of Kings to be born but that it was to be 'a sign' for them. Bethlehem was teeming with people. These shepherds must be able to identify this special child. So then the one you seek will have been laid in a manger.

What the shepherds do next 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.

<sup>15</sup> '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.' <sup>16</sup> So 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 worship, then they witness, they tell people what they have seen.

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

This is the same joy felt by Mary and Elizabeth in the passage last week. Their commission is our commission too. It is what the shepherd's began, the disciples continued and generations have done throughout history, and it is what we are called to do, to spread throughout the world the good news of Jesus Christ, and we should do it with joy. The story of Jesus, God incarnate 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 what of Mary, we are left with a picture of the young girl who 'treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.' It really is a domestic scene. 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. 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.

*'Gloria! Gloria in excelsis deo*

*Angels are singing; the Christ child is born.'* John Rutter

God bless you this Christmas.

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