**14th December 2014**

**Luke 2**

We have been busy trying to get all the health and Safety policies together for the opening of the new youth centre. Here are some thoughts about the nativity story from that perspective:

The union of Shepherd's has complained that it breaches health and safety regulations to insist that shepherds watch their flocks without appropriate seating arrangements being provided, therefore benches, stools and orthopaedic chairs are now available. Shepherds have also requested that due to the inclement weather conditions at this time of year that they should watch their flocks via CCTV cameras from centrally heated shepherd observation huts.

Please note, the angel of the lord is reminded that before shining his / her glory all around she / he must ascertain that all shepherds have been issued with glasses capable of filtering out the harmful effects of UVA, UVB and Glory.

Each week during Advent we have been focusing on a different character in the Nativity story and seeing how they responded to the promise of God towards them. We have looked at Mary and Joseph and this week it is the turn of the shepherds.

Let me start by giving you some very bad shepherd jokes as fund in Christmas crackers:

What did they call the sheep who had all its wool cut off? Shaun! Get it, Shaun sheep.

And where did he get his wool cut off? (*pause*) At the baa-baa’s!

So what do you get if you cross a sheep with a kangaroo? (*pause*) A woolly jumper!

What goes “Baa humbug? (*pause*) A sheep called Scrooge.

So why did the sheep get arrested by the Roman traffic police? (*pause*) For making an illegal ewe turn?

What do you get if your sheep studies karate? (*pause*) A lamb chop!

Luke includes the story about the shepherds in his gospel. Luke has a real concern for those who are on the margins of society, those who respectable people try and avoid. So n his gospel he insist on the obligations of the rich to the poor, the outcast and the marginalised. He has the story of Zacchaeus the rich yet repentant tax collector who gives half his possessions away to the poor. At the home of a respectable Pharisee Jesus advises when you give a banquet invite the poor, the crippled and the lame. In Luke’s gospel the first beatitude is not blessed are the poor in spirit – but blessed are the poor. As a class the shepherds are even lower in the social order than peasants and would qualify quite well as the lowly and the hungry of Mary’s hymn, the Magnificent

Shepherds were uneducated. You don’t need too many brain cells to keep an eye on sheep. In fact you want someone who can only cope with mundane tedious jobs that offer no stimulation or opportunities for initiative. This is the night shift. You may as well watch paint dry. Shepherds watching sheep sleep! Saying that sentence is more exciting than doing their job. Their greatest challenge was staying awake. After all you count sheep to go to sleep.

They were regarded as unclean by the religious classes because they spent all their time dealing with animals, even on a Sabbath. They were not fit to come to the temple and worship God. Yet in the Nativity story God comes to them.

Their boring tedious evening is interrupted by a bright light and the appearance of angels bearing God’s message.

*‘Do not be afraid I bring you good news, news of great joy for the whole nation. Today there has been born to you in the city of David a saviour, Christ the Lord. This will be the sign for you; you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger*.’

And then the heavenly host turn up singing praise to God:

*‘Glory to god in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to all in whom he delights’*

The angels’ message needs some unpacking.

Luke qualifies the title of Messiah by two other titles ‘saviour and Lord’. The title Lord was an ordinary title used by slaves to masters or students to teachers. But used simply as ‘the Lord’ it meant emperor especially from Caesar Augustus onwards. Just as der Fuhrer simply means the leader in German but eventually designated Adolf Hitler as the supreme and only leader, Luke is making a comparable statement. Jesus is Lord not Caesar. In the context of Nazi Germany to have called Christ der Fuhrer would have meant death in Dachau! Luke is making provocative claims about Jesus that in the context of his writing was seditious and could lead to execution by the state.

Likewise the word ‘Saviour’. Caesar Augustus was given the inscription Saviour of the World for saving Rome from civil war and bringing peace to the Roman world – the Pax Romana. The Pax Romana was peace through force. There was an overall ruler who controlled people and quashed any rebellions so ensuring there was order and the rule of law – the law of Caesar. Luke now has the angels declaring that Jesus is the true Saviour, the true bringer of peace. But this will be peace not through violent victory but through nonviolent justice and love with Christ.

The choice is before all mankind. Choose which Saviour you want and which mode of salvation that will truly bring peace to our earth.

This week we discovered the nature of enhanced interrogation procedures that the CIA undertook in the aftermath of 9/11 to try and extract information from suspects and prisoners. Otherwise known as torture, these techniques were claimed to be largely ineffective in obtaining information yet damaging to the America’s reputation as the defender of freedom and democracy. In the same week

Pakistani education activist Malala Yousafzai and Indian child rights campaigner Kailash Satyarthi have received the Nobel Peace Prize awards.

The Nobel committee described both laureates as "champions of peace".

Malala Yousafzai 17, was shot in the head by Taliban gunmen in October 2012 for campaigning for girls' education and now lives in the UK.

She is the youngest-ever recipient of a Nobel prize.

She said she was there to stand up for the rights of forgotten and frightened children, and raise their voice rather than pity them.

"It is for those forgotten children who want education. It is for those frightened children who want peace. It is for those voiceless children who want change.

"I am here to stand up for their rights, raise their voice. It is not time to pity them. It is time to take action so it becomes the last time that we see a child deprived of education." Nobel committee chairman Thorbjorn Jagland stressed the importance of education, saying: "The road to democracy and freedom is paved with knowledge."

In the evening music filled the elegant Oslo Town Hall – as a candlelit procession gave a haunting rendition of Oh Holy Night.

Is the peace that Malala and Kailash Satyarthi long for the same peace that the angels announced on that Holy Night?

The King James Version of the Bible translates the angel’s song with the following words: *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men’.*

Most contemporary biblical scholars agree that that translation is incorrect. It is a bad translation of the actual verse in Greek of verse 14 and bad theology too.

The more accurate translation should be similar to our pew version of the Bible. *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those whom he favours!*

In other words the peace is conditional. It is only peace to those who God favours. It is not peace for all.

Peace is only for those humans of God’s goodwill that is God’s preference, choice and election.

Of course this raises a problem. We want a collective peace for everyone. Kisses and hugs all round. This seems to be qualified peace and appears to emphasise an exclusivity of divine predestination.

Luke however counteracts that understanding before and after by having the angel say this this is great news of great joy for all the people! Not just to the predestined some, but to all people. And at the end of chapter two Simeon takes the infant Jesus in his arms and announces ‘*God’s salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel.’* This is for all. There is divine inclusivity, yet nuanced that the experience of real peace is only had by those who know the favour of God.

Do you know the favour of God? Are you at peace with God? It makes all the difference in the world.

We are a nation of pill poppers apparently. Over half of women and nearly that of men regularly use prescription drugs. We try desperately to live a healthy and peaceful life in this nation of ours but the Bible says our greatest need is for peace with God. From that all other types of peace will come. Yet you can’t get peace with God prescribed on the NHS. In our British culture people want to take the religious element out of Christmas. Everyone does their best to avoid talking about Jesus. It’s as if the only message the angels are allowed to bring are ‘season’s Greetings’: in other words – ‘hey- its winter!’

The peace the angels declare is connected with God – the peace of God. In the United States at the moment there is tension after the deaths of black Americans at the hands of white police officers and grand jury’s not making those officers stand on trial for the deaths. Some are suggesting that some parts of American society are more favoured than others., that there is still inequality in American society.

Ten years ago we went on Sabbatical to the United States. We went to Atlanta in Georgia in the Deep South where slavery and the civil rights struggle had been real issues and still are. It was apparent that blacks and whites rarely mixed. The north of the city was white and the south of the city was black. We were the only white people using the public transport. The churches were more often than not racially segregated. We went to one rare Presbyterian Church that was mixed black and white. The black members of the church always came to church dressed in their Sunday best. The pastor explained to us that during the week a lot of his black members would be janitors or labourers. They would be treated as nobodies, or second class citizens. They could be treated by the majority of the white population with suspicion and prejudice. But they would come to church on Sunday and be somebody. They would be a child of God, adopted into Christ, with an eternal inheritance. They would be free and dignified in the presence of God, at peace with their lord and Saviour. Some would hold important roles in the church, deacons, elders, preachers, Sunday school teachers. Positions they would not be trusted with outside the church. That’s why they dressed up – because they were proud and accepted and affirmed in church before the God who favoured them.

These Shepherds were not learned, they were not wealthy, and they were not wise. Yet they were favoured. The offer of peace was made to them on behalf of all humanity. Having overcome their fear they set off to see the new born baby. The angel said they should see the signs in order to recognise which baby was Jesus. These are thick stupid shepherds let me remind you. The baby will be found lying in a manger, wrapped in swaddling bands.

Even a shepherd would be able to recognise this sign. I read a sign the other day on the escalator in a railway station. It said dogs must be carried on this escalator, always. Which if you read it again, kind of implies that everyone who uses the escalator has to carry a dog! Likewise I saw a fridge in a supermarket that said ‘this fridge is not working due to a technical fault. I thought well thankyou for clarifying that – because maybe the fridge wasn’t working because it was on holiday, or on strike, or was upset and in a grievance procedure.

This was a clear sign. Can we read the igns – of God calling to us to make peace?

The shepherds read the signs. They saw the child and related to Mary and Joseph all that they been told about him. After they had seen Jesus they returned glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen. We do not hear anything else about the Shepherds in the rest of the gospels nor in the story of the early church. They slip out of history. They have done their bit. They never went on to achieve greatness, win Nobel peace prizes, lead churches or whatever. This great display of glory by the host of heaven lighting up the night sky was for the benefit of humble shepherds who would not change the world , who would not do anything significant apart from go to a stable and worship the baby Jesus. We shouldn’t measure people’s lives by their ‘success and achievements’. The shepherds grasped the essential message: they went to Jesus; they found the prince of peace. They glorified and praised God.

Some people want peace without the prince. The peace of God was not a cessation of conflict, peace through victory and violence. The peace of Jesus was peace with God, and peace through nonviolence, love, forgiveness and grace. It was peace which was about an invitation to a party, an invitation to those who don’t usually get invited: the unclean and unwanted. It is a peace that is about justice and equality. That’s why it is good news. Good news for all people. Peace comes down from heaven to earth, but is always and ever a heavenly gift from God.

How do you establish a peaceful world? Can you do it by violence? The terrible truth is that our world has never established peace through victory. Victory establishes not peace but lull. Thereafter violence returns once again, and always worse than before and it is that escalator violence that that then engenders our world. It is violence that is inspired by resentment and bitterness and a desire for revenge.

How do you establish peace on earth? Can it ever be done by violence, especially religious violence? Can it ever be done with a great Final Battle, an Armageddon. The Bible has that image of the end of the world and a final battle. But it also has other images of the end of the world – Luke in his gospel has the image not of a great battle but of a Great Feast – a heavenly banquet where all are invited, all will be fed, where justice and peace will be the overriding concerns, not justice and punishment and vengeance.

Peace on earth has always been elusive before Christ was born and since Christ was born. We still dream of peace on earth. Tantalising glimpses of a Christmas truce between warring nations are special because they are rare moments when we acknowledge our common humanity and our neighbourliness.

No wonder the shepherds were keen to pursue this message of great joy – of peace on earth.

But what they found was that at the centre of the message of peace was a baby, born as the prince of peace. St Paul would declare in his letter to the Romans that through faith in Jesus we have peace with God. Nothing in death or life, wars and violence can separate us from God’ love. That gives us the ultimate peace and security in this life

May you know the good news: there is peace on earth through Christ our Saviour: peace with God, peace with ourselves, and then peace with our neighbour.