**15th December 2013**

**Luke 2:8-20**

We continue today to look at the Songs of Praise in the Christmas Story. Last week we looked at Mary’s song of praise the Magnificat. The previous week, the first Sunday in advent we reflected on Zechariahs Song of Praise. The Benedictus. Of course all this will lead up to the BBC’s Song of Praise featuring our own Joan kingham on Sunday December 29th. Bu this week we are looking at the song of another angel – the angel of the Lord who appeared to the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem on that first Christmas night. I want to look carefully at what the angels actually said. Often we take what they said from lines in Christmas Carols and those lyrical verses may not accurately square up with the actual scriptural accounts.

I don’t know if you believe in angels. I’ve met a number of people who believe they have encountered angels or seen visions of angels. None of them had schizophrenia and did sign language in South Africa!

One lady told me how her father was dying in a hospital bed. Her brother was by his side, she was at home. She got a knock at the door and two handsome men greeted her. She thought it was the Mormons but all they said was ‘do not be afraid – God will be a father to the fatherless’. And they walked away.

At the same time as this was happening her brother in hospital was reading from the Gideon Bible next to his father’s bedside. He was reading to his father the words of Psalm 68, which has the promise that God will be a father to the fatherless. At that moment their father died. But his son and daughter received great strength and comfort from their angelic visitors.

I remember watching a Songs of Praise[[1]](#endnote-1) earlier this year (link on the website) and hearing the story of Roy Godwin. He was involved in a near fatal car crash in 1981 when he swerved to miss some cars and ended up crashing into some woods. A figure came out of the mist and sat by him and laid hands on him. Roy said he felt like he was plugged into the mains. The Police arrived and the mysterious figure told them to get the mans’ wife and then told Roy that he and his wife would be together again and he would be whole and that he had to disregard anything that would counter this. And then the stranger walked off.

When he got to the hospital he had significant injuries and the medics wanted him to sign a form giving them permission to amputate his left leg. Roy remembered what the stranger had said to disregard anything that suggested that he wouldn’t be whole. So he refused to give permission for the amputation. Thirty years later he still has his left leg. He thought he had been dreaming all this until the Police came and interviewed him in hospital and wanted to know who the stranger was who spoke with such authority.

There are 108 references to angels in the Old Testament and 165 in the New Testament. They play a regular and important role in the Christmas story. The Greek word for angel, aggelo, means messenger. It is the same root word from the Hebrew word mal’ak. Angels in the bible don’t just come to do good but to give messages, often disturbing ones, often needing obedience, asking something, and the result is something new and different.

The shepherds are out in the fields watching their flocks. The shepherds were the outsiders in Palestinian society, the great unwashed, the unclean. The angel appears to these outsiders and tells them the good news.

**An angel of the lord appeared to them and the glory of the lord shone around and they were filled with fear.**

The glory is the Jewish Shekinah. The glory is the Divine Presence of God. In the Old Testament, the Presence of God, the glory of God, was the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day. You could see the pillar of fire; you could see the cloud. The glory is ultra-bright. The glory is a fiery light

The words used to describe the shepherd’s experience are from the Greek words "mega" and "phobos". What the shepherds felt was *"mega fear!"* Fear that rates as *"big time fear!"*

When the shepherds were quaking in their boots and covering their eyes from the brightness of God’s glory, the angel says, *"****Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."***

Someone has calculated that the phrase ‘do not be afraid’ occurs 365 times in the bible. Enough for each day of the year.

Nelson Mandela said:

“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.”

Saying ‘don’t be afraid’ to someone who is fearful isn’t that helpful. Saying don’t be afraid because I have good news and then spelling out what that good news is - hopefully puts those fears in perspective and context. Don’t be fearful because there is good news.

We all have concerns, we all have fears – but we need to be constantly reminded that there is good news, even in the direst of circumstances. Good news for most people in our society relates to this world, to success, prosperity, health and wealth. The good news that the angels bring has a different dimension. But it will bring joy for all people.

Some four hundred years ago, Martin Luther wrote the following words. For me, Luther’s words are a key to Christmas. He wrote: “Of what benefit would it be to me if Jesus would have been born a thousand times and it would have been sung daily in my ears that Jesus Christ was born, but that I was never to hear that Jesus Christ was born *for me?”* That Jesus was to be my very own. My very own. [[2]](#endnote-2)

Do you remember your first bike? *Your own bike*? Not your neighbours. Not your friends. Not your brother’s or sister’s but your very own bicycle? Do you remember the thrill, the glow that you felt about that? Getting a bike for Christmas was a typical classic ‘big’ present.

Or, do you remember your first car? I bet you do. Do you remember the feeling inside when you drove that first car? I keenly remember my first car: it was a fiat panda. It was like a biscuit tin on wheels. Built by Italians for a Mediterranean climate, not damp wet Britain. But at least it was so light you could push it yourself to get it started.

Or how about your first home?

Or do you remember your first child? That first child which was born or adopted your very own, and the glow that was inside of you? How can you forget the inner glow that accompanied your first child? It doesn’t seem that long ago when my kids were small and were full of wide eyed wonder of coming downstairs on Christmas Day and finding the stockings at some early hour in the morning. Yes, we all remember the inner satisfaction and inner glow from our first bicycle, car, apartment, home, and child, *when these became our very own*.

And when you finally realize that Christ is *your very own*, not only for all the world, not only for all the shepherds, not only for all the angels, but when you realize that Christ is your very own, *then* there becomes a glow in your heart, and you begin to sing Glory to God.

So despite their fears, despite their lowly position this would be good news for the shepherds but also good news for all people.

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**Joy** is a by-product of Good News (Luke 2:11). Good news is the same word as “gospel.” What is the message, the gospel, the good news? In Luke 2:11, a Saviour is here: Christ the Messiah, the awaited One is here.

Don't be afraid, I bring you good news of great joy Today there has been born unto you in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”

To understand the good news we have to first know the bad news. And the bad news is that we need a Saviour. Fundamental to any society is its understanding of human nature. The Christian faith has always insisted that human nature is flawed and that we cannot save ourselves from sin and death. Liberal society believes that human nature is basically good. If you can only educate people, give them a basic level of comfort and prosperity everyone will be happy and society will function well. At the time of Jesus, the Jews thought Roman oppression was bad and a new political system was needed. But the real oppressor was sin (and sin’s whip is shame). We didn’t need a political hero to lead us out of bondage to Rome; we needed a Saviour to lead us out of bondage to sin and to restore our sense of value.

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. But since our greatest need was forgiveness, for a sense that this life is not meaningless, that death is not the end, God sent us a Saviour. The good news is that God sent His Son to be our Saviour. This is the good news that brings real joy.

Joy is for everyone to experience because the good news is for all people (Luke 2:10). The Saviour is for everyone. Not just the religious, but the secular, too. Not just the reverent, but the irreverent, too. Not just the righteous, but the unrighteous, too. God is no discriminator of persons.

The good news is for everyone; all can receive the gift of Jesus Christ. If you believe you’re beyond help, If you believe you’re past grace, If you believe you’re out of hope, If you believe there is no way out of your predicament, I have good news for you: there is a Saviour who comes to bring good news that brings joy.

Joy is confirmed in the experiences of life (Luke 2:12, 15-20). But joy can be enjoyed no matter what life's circumstances are.

“Right, minister. You don't know my circumstances!

Hasn't anything ever robbed you of your joy?” Yes, life does deal harsh blows at times. The Bible encourages us to keep our vision clear and our focus on God. The real joy is lasting. Your circumstances will not always be conducive to joy, that is, if joy were found in your circumstances.

You see, the story of the first Christmas is old. Here is the same old story of political oppression and political violence, of those on the bottom who must obey and those on the top giving the orders. It was in Bethlehem but it could also be Syria, Beijing, North Korea. It was Caesar Augustus, but it could have also been your boss at the office, the English teacher during first period, or an oncologist at your last doctor visit. We are always being jerked around by external decrees.   
What do you do when your life is caught, jerked around by forces outside your control? Does your joy have to be demolished? No, because joy is not totally dependent on your circumstances.

Observe the shepherds’ circumstances: poor, menial jobs, left out in the cold. But, they were overjoyed (v. 20). Had their circumstances changed? Not at all!

**They will see a sign – a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger**. Our God doesn’t do royal robes, palaces and state occasions. Humility and grace – signs of God’s coming. The whole Christian message begins with…

* Parents who are poor.
* A mother in labour with no place to go.
* A new-born child with no crib for a bed.
* Visitors who come to see the child who have no influence.

So you see, there is no reason for fear. There is no barrier to overcome. No person is too poor, or too uneducated, or too insignificant to come to the Christ child who is sent by the God who is vulnerable[[3]](#endnote-3)

**And the heavenly host praised God saying ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to all in whom he delights.**

Peace comes from heaven down to earth, but is always and ever a heavenly gift from God. It’s not a peace brought about by violence such as the pax romana – the peace of Rome. The Roman Empire imposed a certain kind of peace on the Mediterranean world at the time of Jesus, through force. People lived in fear and didn’t step out of line because the Roman Empire would ruthlessly suppress them. This is a different peace. Does peace come through violent victory or non-violent justice?

Peace here is the Hebrew shalom, which indicates not just an inner disposition or the absence of war, but evokes a whole social order of well-being and prosperity, security and harmony.

The recipients of this messianic peace have occasioned a good measure of dispute. The implication is that peace is given to those who are God’s people, with overtones of election, those whom God has favoured or chosen.

But earlier the angels announced that this Saviour was for all. God favours all; God wants all to know this peace. The issue of course is as ever on our side. Do we accept the gift of peace. Do we journey like the shepherds to see if it’s true? Do we hurry off to find the child born to be the saviour of the world, the giver of peace? Do we accept that we need a Saviour. Do we trust, actively trust that God is there, we are not alone – that God is still there and wow, actually interested in us, for us, for you, for me. That gives a deep peace in a world full of chaos. The peace is there for all, but in reality it is only there for those who appropriate it for themselves, make it their own.

Deep, real joy is not the result of what we do. Rather the result of what God does. Mary started singing a song. The shepherds danced back to their jobs. People are joyful, because God has taken action. There is a force greater than ourselves at work in the world. We who are so sensible, down to earth, dull technological people learned that night in Bethlehem: Somebody else is active in this world. In our battles with emperors or with malignancies of body, mind, and spirit, it isn’t all left up to us. There is a Saviour.   
Christmas tells us God has acted. God has taken initiative. God has chosen to be involved. Good news, news of great joy for you and for all[[4]](#endnote-4)

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p014fvl4> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Pastor Edward F. Markquart, Grace Lutheran Church, Seattle, Washington

   <http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_gloria.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Jewell, 1999

   <http://www.lectionarysermons.com/Dec24&99.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dr. Dwight Gunter, *Preacher's Magazine*, 2007

   <http://www.nph.com/nphweb/html/pmol/webdec16.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)