

## **Christmas Sermon 25 December 2021 – Celebrating the birth of Jesus. Being witnesses to his love**

It's Christmas once again – can you believe it? And what a year it's been! A year of ups and downs - hardships, sorrow and disconnectedness. And for some it has been a year of just feeling down. Of being drained and tired. And yet Christmas is a season of hope and light. Of remembering – remembering the story of the birth of Jesus. And in remembering we celebrate – celebrate because through Jesus' birth God came and dwelt among us. But Christmas is also about gathering to interpret – to make sense of – what all this means for our daily lives. Not only as individuals but as community as well.

The birth of Jesus is the same as, and yet different to, any other birth. Like any other birth, there are different emotions and responses at play. A new baby generally brings joy, wonder and excitement, even in difficult circumstances. Different, because it marks God's entry into the history of all humanity: good, bad and indifferent. It is a birth that brings with it a message of life and hope – Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness, reminding us of God's love and grace. Something we need to remember in the light of the year we have had. We know that the birth of a baby changes our lives on all levels – whether you are a parent, sibling, grand parent, aunt or uncle – all have to make changes. Life cannot carry on as before. So... the question I would like us to reflect on today is, what does Christmas mean for us – you and me? How does remembering and celebrating the birth of Jesus make a difference in our lives and in the lives of other people in practical ways? In other words, what is our response to God's activity in our lives? Our response which not only is an act of faith but also an act of interpretation.

When we look at our Gospel reading, which tells the familiar story of Jesus' birth, we see that it is a story of contrasts – the ordinary, and extraordinary. The ordinary – a government census, a pregnant teenager, shepherds in the fields, a baby wrapped in cloth, a manger, and an inn. People travelling from one town to another, the cries of a baby at birth and the noise of animals.

The extraordinary - angel speaking to the shepherds, the glory of the Lord shining and God becoming one of us.

In the midst of this – the mundane (everyday ordinary things) and the amazing (spiritual things) - we see how different people respond:

Firstly, **the Angels** “bringing you good news of great joy for all the people” (v10) and **praising** God (v13-14). They are witnesses of this great event. The thing about praise is that it draws us away from ourselves and makes us focus on the one we are praising. It is an act of witness/testimony.

Secondly, the **Shepherds** who were “**terrified**” when “an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them” (v9). But once they were reassured by the angel they went to find and see - “**Let’s go and see**” (Luke 2:15) - what God had made known to them. Once they saw, they told others what they had heard and seen - “**They made known** what had been told them about this child” (2:17). They then go back to their lives, but they go back “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (v20). The shepherds to go back to their ordinary lives.

Seemingly nothing had changed and yet everything had changed. They go back changed and they share their experience – they are witnesses - telling and praising God for what has been revealed to them.

Thirdly, there are **all** those who heard the message the shepherds brought were “**amazed**”. A response that does not tell us what the outcome is. Did those who were amazed go and share the news or did it stop there with their amazement?

And then fourthly, there is **Mary**. Last week we heard her song of praise – the Magnificat. This week we are told she **treasured** the words of the shepherds and “**pondered** them in her heart.” Some commentators describe Mary’s pondering as “tossing and turning them over”; “throwing / putting things together”. Possibly trying to make sense of all that is happening around and within her. There is a sense of tension between her pondering in verse 19 and the shepherds “praising” in v20. Which also makes us pause and think about the tension that may be at play within herself when we think about her song of praise, in last week’s reading, and her pondering in today’s reading. A response that could be seen as being on opposite ends of the spectrum – one outgoing and the other more introspective.

Through the Gospel reading we are given insight into a variety of responses to the event of Jesus’ birth. Of how those who were present interpreted, or tried to make sense of, what was happening. But it should also cause us to reflect on our response to Jesus’ birth. To ask ourselves what it means for us today in the way we live our lives? Live out our faith.

The passage from Isaiah is one of praise for, and witness to, God for the return of those who had been living in exile. The messengers/sentinels bring good news of God's salvation and "all the ends of the earth" see this.

The writer to the Hebrews says, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being..." (Hebrews 1: 1-3) This is the writer's expression of faith and witness to who Jesus is.

What will our witness be after the service today? What Christmas story will we tell?

Christmas is the old, old story of Jesus and his love. As we remember and celebrate that old, old story, I pray that we may share – and live – that love proclaiming it as "good news of great joy for all the people."

Amen