

Readings

Isaiah 9: 6-7

Luke 2: 1-14

Thank you for being here.

If you have children I hope this wasn't your experience today. A Dad found his little boy writing a note. It said "Dear Santa Claus, I am writing to you with a new Christmas list because I've just found all the toys I asked for in my last letter under the spare room bed".

Santa Claus -thinking of Santa Claus I imagine most of us would have a pretty similar vision of what he is like. An elderly gentleman rather portly, white beard, red suit with white fur trim? Yes? Do you remember that old Bing Crosby song " Santa Claus is coming to town"

Come to think of it, is our image of God a bit like the Santa Claus in this song?. Keeping watch to see what we are up to! Trying to catch us out. We have to be very good if we want to be given presents. But what is God really like? Do we have to be good before God will want to have anything to do with us?. These questions are crucial. The Christmas story gives us answers. Jesus reveals the truth about God.

Have you ever thought about how shocking the Christmas story is! It tells us we can find God in an animal feeding trough, in a back street in Bethlehem, as a naked, vulnerable, new born baby. Really! That's radical! So unexpected, if you were making up a story about God coming to live in a human body, surely he'd be born in a palace or at least a posh private hospital. This story demands our attention.

Let's look at our reading from the Gospel of Luke. Caesar Augustus, the head of the Roman Empire had ordered a census. This required Joseph and the heavily pregnant Mary to travel to Bethlehem to sign the register and pay taxes. While there their baby son was born, and all we are told is that Jesus was laid in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn. We picture the traditional nativity scene wooden stable, straw, cows, donkeys etc. But much more likely is that Jesus was born in a cave. The Holy land is mountainous, about the size of Wales, with the Jordan valley running down the centre. Caves and tents would have been a common form of housing.

Out of town, There was another cave, on a hillside. A shepherds cave. Let's Picture the scene. A cold dark night. The sheep and goats, the shepherds most valuable possession, tucked away safely at the back of the cave. Then at the front the small group of shepherds, maybe with their wives and children, gathered around a fire, warming themselves perhaps cooking some supper. They would have been used to the darkness, the stillness of the night, punctured by the occasional sound of wolves howling in the distance. Everything as normal, same old, night after night, perhaps the shepherds were fed up, depressed. And then suddenly something happens that changes everything!

We are told an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. I don't know what an angel would look like. But I imagine the shepherds being terrified at a brilliant light of unknown source. They come out of the cave to see what's going on. They hear a voice "Do not be afraid, I bring you good news that will cause great joy to all the

people, today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you, he is the Messiah, the Lord, this will be a sign to you; you will find a baby wrapped in cloths lying in a manger". If I'd been there I would've wanted to say "excuse me if this is an invitation to visit a new born baby you haven't given me nearly enough information, where in Bethlehem do we find this Baby?, can't you at least give me the post code so I can put it in my satnav.!"

The greatest event in history had just happened. The shepherds are told who the baby is "Saviour, the Messiah, The Lord". God born a human baby, and this awesome news is announced first to lowly shepherds, ordinary working people. This amazing news is for everyone, no one is excluded. The shepherds responded to this invitation by heading off to town to look for Jesus.

But before they went the night became even more awesome. There was even more light and voices praising God and singing "glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours" other translations say "on whom his favour rests".

This song of the Angels, known as The Gloria, a version of which we sang a few minutes ago, carries a message that has inspired 100's of composers over the centuries. Can we hear it's timeless message. The angels sing of God's peace. It's available to us here and now. The Angels tell us God's favour rests on us- He is pleased with us.

Compare The Angels song with the song we thought about a few minutes ago, "Santa Claus is coming to town".

In that song we are watched to see if we are naughty or nice, bad or good. Presents are conditional on good behaviour. That's not how it is with God. He loves us with a fierce unconditional love. Nothing we can do can make God love us more and nothing we can do can make God love us less. That's his promise to us. This is what Jesus birth that Christmas night 2000 years ago shows us. This good news is for you and me, and it is good news not good advice. Not instructions, no preconditions, just an invitation. The Angels tell us that God's favour rests, is permanently on us, it did that night and still does now, Christmas Eve 2016. Nothing will ever change that.

The Christmas story is a message of hope. A message for each of us that the future can be different. Recall the angel told the terrified shepherds not to be afraid. The angel could have said "you won't have to be afraid anymore if you look at what I'm showing you". Older translations of the bible say "Fear not for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy". Don't fear but look.

The shepherds were able to look at Jesus face to face. We can meet Him through the pages of the bible. Looking at Jesus, learning to trust Him, will change your life. The degree to which you truly look at, gaze at, think about Jesus, to that degree the fears we have for our lives and futures will be diminished. You have started looking by being here tonight. Please continue and to help you we have a small gift of Luke's gospel, for each of you to take home.

May I wish you all a very Happy Christmas.