

Sunday, 18 December 2022

## The Birth of Jesus

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Luke 2:1-21

### **Intro**

Don't we all have memories of the Nativity play. Whether at school or church. I'm sure we've all can recall when we involved or when we went to see the nativity being performed. The question is what sticks out to you. Was it the sterling performance of Mary? Was it the question of whether there really was a hamster in the stable? Or maybe why tree number 3 seemed to have some sort of interpretive dance routine at the birth of Jesus.

Well I'll tell you my two vivid memories of my childhood school and church Nativities. Firstly, I think I was in year 2 and was given the opportunity to be an angel. I can clearly remember my horror at discovering I was meant to wear white tights and wings. This led to an escalating tantrum and one angel that was less a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and more grumping looking 6 years old wishing for the whole ordeal to be over. My second recollection was that of the wisemen entering the church on papier-mâché camels with a wave of reggae inspired intro music.

As funny as some of those moments are, aren't we glad the biblical narrative is instead full of majesty, clothed in humbleness, as the King of all creation enters human history.

The Gospels are the crunch point of the whole of the Bible. And we find ourselves here, right at the start. The Birth of Jesus. Caesar has called for a census to be held and that people must return to their own town to be registered. Mary goes with Joseph to where his ancestry line is from, the town of David, Bethlehem.

As we've read through our passage today, I wonder what aspects stood out to you? The Angels entrance, Mary and Joseph caring for Jesus or the stories being shared. Today we are going to reflect on one of the most famous Christmas passages of the Christmas story and look at the life of the Shepherds.

## **The Shepherds are Outsiders** (v8)

So who are the Shepherds? Was it just a random choice by God to bring the Angels to them with a message or was it deliberate? What makes the shepherds special?

Let's remind ourselves of verse 8, 'And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.' Shepherds are vital for life in society around Jerusalem. Firstly in the physical, sheep are the main source of food, milk and wool, for clothing. Without sheep many people would struggle to survive, the shepherds care and protection for sheep is critical to life.

As well as this, Worship to God was also a common and vital part of life in the culture. Twice a day, morning and evening, a lamb would be given as a sacrifice in the temple to cover the sins of the people.

That may sound strange to some of us but what its showing is that justice is being fulfilled between the Jewish people and God. To put its in a way we might understand better. Would you be happy for someone who has stolen your car to just be let off the hook and allowed to have your vehicle and drive away in it. No, we would want some form of justice wouldn't we? Therefore when the Jews do something wrong they offend and sin against that perfect God. God needs justice to be served to remain fair and Holy. He can't just let everyone off the hook. Just like we would want justice if someone stole from us.

Therefore because we are sinners against a Holy God, we deserve punishment, In the book of Romans it says that wages for Sin is Death. So either the offender must receive that punishment due or the debt must be met in another way.

Well in Jewish society a sacrifice of a lamb was given, morning and evening, at the temple to make up for the wrong things the people had done, or to atone for those sins. The penalty for sin is death, either the people die or the lamb in there place. This is how the Jews kept the relationship good with God.

So these shepherds would have been fulfilling the important role of looking after the Sheep that would have been used for that sacrifice.

Even with this noble task, Shepherds were looked down on by society, they were outsiders, both physically as the roamed in the wilderness and in terms of the community. They were looked down on as travellers, living in tents, with no wealth, property, land or authority. They were even seen as criminals as they led there flocks across land that they didn't own. These men were practical, hard men, they knew how to defend themselves, they knew the details of there trade and they worked hard in all that they did. Humble outsiders fulfilling there duty to provide for others.

God selects hard working men to be the first witnesses of His Son, Jesus, entering the world.

## **The Message of Peace has Arrived** (9-14)

These Shepherds, outsiders with no particular value, are then greeted by an angel, followed by a whole company of heavenly hosts. This amazing moment occurs, when God reveals himself to outsiders. He chooses the humble, the weak, the outcasts.

Not just this, when we step back and think about how history is unfolding. God has not appeared on earth in any form for about 400 years. And now Gods presence arrives back on the scene, to outsiders. By appearing to the shepherds, God showed his grace towards mankind, the inclination of his heart is to outsiders, to those lost in society and in the spiritual wilderness.

So as the Shepherds are stunned and in fear. The angel says 'Do not be afraid. I bring your Good News that will cause Great joy for all the people'. This message really is for all people, God has chosen to take it first to the Shepherds, the outsiders.

So what is this Good news that will bring Great joy for all people?

Verse 11 gives us an indication of this big news. The Messiah, The Lord has come. What would that have meant? Well the Jewish people were waiting for the Messiah, the anointed one or chosen one. They were looking for a valiant, military King, to overthrow the Romans and arrive at the temple.

What they received was ever so different.

But that is the beauty of God. When he puts his plan into action, he doesn't make a loud noise to the most powerful human ruler. No, he brings the beauty of the humble baby to the lowly shepherds.

But the magnitude of the message is no less dramatic. Verse 14 shows the Angels response - almost the The Chorus of Christmas. 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth Peace to those on whom his favour rests'.

### ***So what is peace?***

Peace is always something people say they want. Something the world needs but never seemingly comes to fruit.

In the society that the Gospel of Luke is set in, the world is living under a time of Pax Romana, which means Roman Peace. The great Roman empire is in a time of peace, without war, a modern sophisticated society. Why do people need Peace then?

The one Stoic Philosopher said 'While the emperor may give peace from war on land or sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief and envy. He cannot give peace of heart for which man yearns more than even for outward peace'.

The Roman Peace was a forced peace, a military rule not a true peace, not an authentic and loving relationship between people and emperor.

Now as God enters the world Spiritual Peace is bought forward that can bring restoration between man and God.

Life wasn't that much more different than life currently, Taxes were high, moral were slipping, unemployment was rife, the military has state control. All of those things can be seen in society today can't they? The fact is, today's world leaders, postmodern thinking or Roman law, Greek philosophy, and Jewish religion, all of it couldn't and can't meet the needs of the human heart.

A relationship directly with the creator is the only true way to a peaceful heart. Its like buying an Iphone charger, you can buy a cheap one for a few pounds, and its works for a bit but then it starts to say 'accessory not compatible', you turn it off and try to refit it and it sort of works but the eventually dies. But, even though the cost is higher, when you get a proper official product its work correctly. We may see moments of outward Peace in the world but inward peace that sustains and brings people to true freedom is only found in Jesus, in the heart of God the creator.

John 16:33 says "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

That in me you may have peace. When life is hectic, the world seems manic. God promises Peace. Because peace isn't about the world around us, Spiritual peace, is found in relationship with God. And as that internal relationship comes to fruit that is when lives are transformed and peace overflows into the world around us.

### **Lives Transformed by Peace** (15-20)

This Peace that the Shepherds are blessed with, even though they are outsiders, is a gift from God. To be able to see Jesus as he enters the world.

The result of the visit from the Angels moves the Shepherds into action. James 2:17 says 'In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.' The wonderful thing about coming to Jesus is that, even if you may feel like an outsider, like the shepherds did, there is no work you need to do to have a restored relationship with God. You don't need to gain salvation or go do enough good works. You can come freely, as you are to him. Then as we have faith in Jesus and rejoice in who he is and what he has done. Our lives are an overflow of good works as result of that faith. Worship in all spheres of life is result of peace in our heart and faith in our souls.

This is where the Shepherds find themselves. They have heard a wonderful message and have responded in faith. Firstly, to go and find the King, Messiah and Lord as we see that in verses 15 and 16. They hurried off to find the baby. Looking for the unique sign of him being laid in a manger (a trough for animals). They endeavour to find out the truth of what has been revealed to them and then to learn more about that truth and the Messiah.

The shepherds continue, don't they? To spread the word concerning the new King. Wouldn't you have loved to have been a fly on the wall for that moment between Mary, Joseph and the Shepherds. It must have been wonderful hearing them share the incredible stories together. How God had visited them all in different ways, through Angels, and brought them to see Jesus. Fulfilling the promises from years before.

The Shepherds are not passive in wanting to understand more about God and what the Angels have said. That maybe a challenge we all need to undertake. Whether you don't yet believe in Jesus or whether you know and have known him for along time, we all need to active in finding out more, seeking after Jesus.

The verse that really struck me when looking at the Shepherds is verse 20. 'The shepherds returned, glorifying God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.' It's the simplicity of it, that I love.

The very first scene of the first hobbit film, starts with Bilbo Baggins in his Hobbit-Hole in Bag-end in the Shire. Bilbo is writing to Frodo, the story of the adventures he has been on, reflecting back on all he has seen and heard. And as he starts writing he says 'I'm old now Frodo. I am not the same hobbit I once was...'. His life experiences have totally transformed him. Even though he is back, in bag end, in the shire, in his home. Whether for better or worse, he is totally changed.

We all go through stages in life with dramatic circumstances at some point. Whether a big life change, a difficult season. But the truth and transformation of something happening in our lives is really seen when we return back to normal.

The Shepherd's returned to there fields. They returned to being 'outsiders' in community. Back to the normal 9-5, family-life, dealing with the ins and outs that we all go through but there lives are transformed, the inner peace they have now led them to glorify God, rejoice in all they had seen, heard and been involved in. Transformation has happened because the Shepherds, heard the message of peace, rejoiced in it and actively lived for God.

## Application

So as we come to finish there is a number of question to ask ourselves.

Have you ever felt like an outsider?

Well the Shepherds knew what that was like. Even though there role was significant in rearing sheep to be used in all aspects of life. They were still seen as outsiders, held in low esteem and criminals at times. But although there circumstance weren't favourable. God chose the humble hard working shepherds as the first people to see the newborn King of Kings. So if you ever feel downcast, worthless, an outsider. Then please don't look to gain fame, authority, power and money in the eyes of the world because none of it will bring True Peace. That is only granted from knowing the peace that was given for all humans. That restored relationship with God.

Next, How do we gain true peace?

The fact is the Bible calls us Sinners, we are divided from God. If we want eternal life and true peace we must be united with him. This can only happen through a perfect, spotless, blameless sacrifice. As the lambs were given daily to be sacrificed in the the temple, covering the peoples sins and restoring there relationship with God. Now, the final lamb was being given to the world. To bring ultimate and final restoration between God and those who believe in Jesus. Hebrews 10:10 says 'And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.' Christ work on the Cross is enough for everyone to be restored to full relationship with God.

Lastly, How has your life been transformed?

The Shepherds returned back to there normal working lives. Back to the fields, back to looking after and protection the sheep. But there lives were changed through there encounter with Jesus. They left rejoicing and glorifying God. For those who follow Jesus, are our lives transformed through knowing him? Does the way we act in work or in the home reflect the miracle God has done in our hearts? What is the effect of knowing true peace?

We rejoice in the fact that we have hope in salvation. But also we should rejoice in the smallest details of lives, that are renewed and restored by Gods grace. We are living Sacrifices as Paul point out in Romans. Everything in life is worship to him.

The message of Peace has arrived for all mankind who are willing to humble themselves and reflect on the King of Kings that is found in the manger. Are you willing to accept that message of peace and let it transform your life?

Lets Pray before we sing.

Father we thank you that you chose to enter the world in the most humble way, to the outsiders. As we are outsiders who have been bought in, would you show us how to reach out with the true message of peace. that you have given to us and help share it to others. Father if we have never fully taken on the message of peace for our own lives would you give us the courage, as the shepherd did, to go after you, search you out, read you word and allow the true loving God to transform our lives.