

Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:15-21

We don't really know at what time of year Jesus was born but I am really pleased that the early church decided to celebrate his birth at this time of year. It is a difficult time for many people. Throughout the autumn the days have been getting shorter and the nights longer and colder. At midwinter there is a change and the days begin to lengthen and we start moving back to spring.

It is good to have something of true and lasting significance to celebrate at this time of year.

The promise of the coming Saviour was not fulfilled in auspicious circumstances. As Joseph & Mary travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem they travelled through a deeply divided country.

The people were ruled over harshly by King Herod, the Roman's puppet king.

The ordinary people were despised by the religious leaders.

They were scorned by the anti-Roman revolutionaries.

They were exploited by corrupt tax men

Many people were longing for the Saviour who God had promised to send, but there were many different expectations of what he would be like.

John's gospel tells us that Jesus came to His own people and they did not receive Him. On the whole people did not recognize his origin or significance. They called him Jesus of Nazareth not associating him with Bethlehem where it was expected the Messiah would be born. But some did recognize Him.

To a casual observer - there was nothing remarkable in Jesus' birth. Yes the birth took place in very different physical circumstances to our sanitized 21<sup>st</sup> hospitals. But many of my South American Friends would have been born in similar or even poorer conditions.

If angels had not spoken to the shepherds, hardly anyone but Jesus' parents and the Innkeeper would have noticed the birth of this child in a stable.

***But nothing as significant as this birth  
had happened since  
the creation of life on earth the world.***

The history of the Old Testament people of God was a history of their failure to be loyal to the Covenant they had made with God. But within the people of Israel there were always a faithful few, a remnant. John tells us that there were those who did receive Him & believed in Him and He gave them the power to become the Children of God. Jn 1:11f

**Mary** was one of the faithful remnant and she believed the angel Gabriel when he came to tell her that she would be the mother of the Messiah.

**Joseph** too showed that he was part of the faithful remnant when he believed the angel who was sent to Him in a dream. In obedience to God he took Mary as his wife but did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born.

**The Shepherds** were despised by the religious leaders because their work did not allow them to keep the ritual laws. But they were part of the remnant. They believed the message of the angels & went to check it out. They were touched by wonder & joy.

It was to this faithful remnant that Y' chose to reveal Himself and to involve in His plans.

He couldn't use:

**King Herod** - His priority was to stay King.

**The Priests** - to maintain the Status Quo of a religion that was not helping people meet with God.

He couldn't use **The Pharisees** - They began well - a back to the bible group but got stuck on legalism and spiritual pride. A show of religion and virtue but

lacking the reality of love for God and Neighbour

He couldn't use **The Revolutionaries - Zealots** -

They were Fierce nationalist who hated the Romans.

You can't bring in the Kingdom of God - a kingdom based on self-giving love by hatred, violence and military victory.

As the shepherds sat around their camp fire out in the open they weren't expecting anything out of the ordinary. If anything important were to happen they would be the last to hear of it.

They knew that Y' had promised to send a saviour.

Many Jews like them were longing for God to act.

Sometimes they might have remembered that 1,000 years before King David had been a shepherd boy out on the hills around Bethlehem. God had promised that one of David's descendants would come as King and establish an everlasting Kingdom.

Our God is a God who speaks, He reveals himself. When he wanted to tell the world that he was about to send the Saviour He didn't tell Kings in Palaces or Priests in the temple. He sent an angel to give the news to ordinary working people going about their everyday work.

The shepherds weren't expecting anything special on that night. What a surprise they had! What would Y', the great creator, the Holy One have to say to ordinary people like them? It was not a message of judgement, or the wrath of an angry God.

It was a gracious message about a promise fulfilled, a new beginning, a baby boy born in a stable, come from heaven to be God's anointed Saviour.

**The all powerful God cares so much about us  
About ordinary people  
that he sent his own son to earth  
to open for us the way to life with God  
and to the life of the Kingdom of Heaven**

The shepherds heard the message & went to see. They saw that it was true & went back glorifying God in their hearts and praising Him with their lips.

The Lord our God still wants ordinary people like us to be filled with the joy of the good news. He wants to restore us to our true vocation to live as people made in God's image, sons and daughters of God. Our true worship is to live as trusting and obedient children of God.

Just as the angel came to them The Lord our God comes to us in all kinds of different ways. A narrow escape, an illness, the death of a friend or relative or hard times. We see a new born child, we experience love, beauty and creativity and we know that there is more to life than simple material stuff & pleasure.

The Lord our God speaks to us most clearly through the scriptures. It shows us what our loving Heavenly Father is like and how we can live to please Him.

I read that many Muslims in N. Africa are coming to faith in Jesus through visions of Jesus in their dreams. God does not leave Himself without a witness.

The important thing is **not the means The Lord uses to speak to us** but when he manages to get our attention **how do we respond to God's love.**

There are two lovely examples of this at work at the end of our Gospel reading. **The shepherds** decided amongst themselves that the thing to do in the light of this news was to go and see if it is true. That was a great response to God's revelation. There is a lovely opportunity for anyone who is wondering about the truth and significance of the Good News of Jesus. Jo'an and Hsiangling are setting up an Alpha

The shepherds checked out and found it was true. They went away glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard.

The witness of the shepherds would confirm what Mary and Joseph had already believed.

How did Mary respond? "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

Joseph and Mary had a tremendous responsibility to care for this special child. They had a secret to hold and live with for the safety of the baby in a risky treacherous world.

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you know us and love us. We pray that you will help us to know more and more how much you love us, to see you more clearly, to love you more dearly and to follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.