

Broughty Ferry Baptist Church 21 December 14 6:30pm Epilogue

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. ⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests. ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about. ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land and seeing for myself some of the places central to the Christmas story. Nazareth was the town where Mary and Joseph lived together with relatives - either there or in one of the surrounding villages. It was a small place of 400 people and the villages even smaller, unlike the large community of tens of thousands today. Bethlehem then a small village south of Jerusalem is today a large community of many thousands whose urban spread of roads, houses and other buildings has met up with that from Jerusalem so that the road between them is completely within an area of urban development taking twenty minutes at the most to travel.

It was a quiet rural community with the hills dotted with sheep pens where the many shepherds looked after their sheep. Yet shepherds were not accepted figures in the society of that day but outcasts living in the margins doing that job because they couldn't do anything else. Sleeping outside with animals was tough and smelly. Not much chance for a social or family life if that was your job. Ordinary people didn't mix with shepherds nor did they feel welcome in the wider community in any place where people gathered. Yet God wanted to make a clear point in the announcement of the birth of Jesus. It was not to royalty or the establishment; political or religious leaders in the nation but to shepherds minding their own business in the fields. What did the angel say and what might this message say to people in our generation?

1. Do Not be afraid! ...the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. (Luke 2:10) The presence of God has caused their response of fear. The presence of God was in that place in such a tangible way that these men were afraid. The sense of reverent awe is so often missing from the Church of Jesus Christ with a focus on what I enjoy in God's presence rather than what makes God happy as a result of my conduct. How might an outsider interpret our understanding of God's character and His relationship with us through the songs that we sing in services? or through other aspects of worship services? Or through the way we relate to one another both before and after the services? How does God want us as His children to revere Him in a way that avoids the cringing fear or terror that inhibits both a healthy relationship with God and a right focus on service for God? There is much food for thought here through the words of Luke 2. It may be that the questions we meditate on are more fruitful for us than the answers we may produce

2. **A sign for you** *Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord.*¹² *This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger* (Luke 2:11-12) Many Jews are praying for the coming of the Messiah. There are a few exceptions to the rule who understand more clearly their Scriptures, as Luke will explain later like Simeon and Anna, but the vast majority are praying for a military conqueror that will defeat and expel the Roman occupiers. We too bring our prayer requests to God with similar sincerity. There are many times when the answers we seek for our prayers are not amongst the options we express to God or expect from God. It is also possible that these Shepherds may not have been particularly devout in their personal convictions –but God spoke to them first about the birth of Jesus. How ought we to view this situation? Firstly God does answer our prayers but understanding how God works in the Bible suggests that there are occasions when His people get major surprises about how He will choose to work. Do we need to be open to this fact more often when we come to prayer? I know that I often have answers that I am wanting to receive when I pray –but God’s plans are not always the same as ours. Isaiah 55:8-9: *For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord.*⁹ *‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.* We all know these words in principle, but the practising of such a conviction is a different matter sometimes! God’s answer here is a baby. No quick fixes in sight. The ministry of Jesus is at least three decades away. Thirty years at least of prayers for God to work before people see Jesus in action. There is a challenge here about patience. We want things to happen yesterday or at least today or in the very near future. I wonder how few Jews of that day actually recognised that God had answered their prayers through the arrival of the baby in Bethlehem. Do I need to learn more patience? Do I need to ask God to open my eyes to see more clearly how He is working in the world rather than how I think He ought to be working right now! This is a really important question but a hard one to work through, but it keeps us humble recognising our place in His plans.

3. **A Declaration to you** *‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favour rests* (Luke 2:14) What is it all about ultimately that first Christmas? Answer –the glory of God! What supremely is important in my life? That I / we glorify Him in our lives. Psalm 67 reminds us: *May the peoples praise You, God; may all the peoples praise You.*⁴ *May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for You rule the peoples with equity and guide the nations of the earth.*⁵ *May the peoples praise You, God; may all the peoples praise You.*⁶ *The land yields its harvest; God, our God, blesses us.*⁷ *May God bless us still, so that all the ends of the earth will fear Him.* We sing ‘Its all about you Jesus...’ –the question of whether we live it when we are under pressure in a variety of situations is a constant challenge. If we grasp more that it is about His glory rather than recognition and honour for you or me, then we might find it easier to see others praised ahead of ourselves or being honoured more than us for similar work accomplished. Do I / You need to pray give me a greater passion for Your glory; that Your name may be lifted higher in our city this coming year than in the previous one. When God is most glorified His people are most blessed! This is the significance of this declaration from the angel. That is, His favour and special blessings are most consciously received by His children when we are most committed to giving all the glory and honour to Him.

4. **A Response from you** *the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about* (Luke 2:15b) Depending on which group of shepherds dotted around the valley received this extraordinary revelation, they may not have had too far to walk into the village. The question was not one of distance but of attitude. They were willing to go into Bethlehem to find the special baby that had been born. However, by contrast some time later the religious leaders in Jerusalem took a very different attitude to the coming of the wise men to Herod in Jerusalem. Matthew 2:1-6 reminds us:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.'³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ When he had called together **all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law**, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd My people Israel."' How many key religious leaders does Luke understand were invited to this consultation with Herod? Luke suggests that all of them that were in Jerusalem at this time were invited to the meeting. Therefore, they could not say they had not heard the news. Yet to the best of our knowledge not a single one of them went to Bethlehem. Does this not strike you as odd? Considering that Bethlehem was only an hours' walk away from capital city, and even allowing for extra time to look for the baby there, it was not too much of an effort to have gone to have a look, particularly as these foreigners from Iraq had considered it important enough to travel for weeks in their search for the birth of this special new King. How closely am I / are we listening to God for guidance? Christians all claim that we are -yet it is likely that there are many occasions that Christians miss out on the will of God or evidences of His presence with us because we are so busy with our plans that we want God to bless that we cannot sense what He is trying to say to us. Do I / do you need to ask the Lord to enable me / us to become more sensitive to listening for His promptings in my life? Are you here today and still you have not yet put your faith and trust in Jesus? What are you waiting for? The time is now to take that step of faith. Will you respond to His invitation just now?

5. **A Witness from you** *When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.* (Luke 2:17-18) When you have become a believer it is incumbent upon us in small or larger ways to communicate something of God's love for people to others. We will want to share something of our testimony with people or in other ways to share our faith with people God puts across our pathway. I want to thank the Lord for the record number of homes in the area who have received the Good News newspaper and invitations to services. I thank the Lord for all the people who took the time to deliver one or two blocks of leaflets this Christmas. There may be other people we have personally invited through a physical contact; a postal communication or social media message. There are many ways this can happen. The question is this for us as Christians: Am I seeking opportunities, in an appropriate manner, to live for Jesus in my workplace; my family or my street? There are many different ways we can do it. Have you lost that hunger for opportunities? Or that desire to pray expectantly for them? Maybe we need to say Lord help me to increase my desire to share You with other people.

6. **A Return to Worship** *The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told* (Luke 2:20) The story is back to where it began with worship and praise of our glorious God. This is so important to keep God at the centre of everything we do. We affirmed at a Church meeting that we are: 'Building a Christ centred church: looking to Christ –growing in Christ –sharing Christ.' May we be a thankful people for the opportunities we have had this year and maybe the blessings received as we stepped out in faith. 'To God be the glory great things He has done', may we sing and declare these truths at the very same time to say: 'To God be the glory great things He will do', for Jesus' sake, Amen