

Luke 2:8-20 The reason for our joy

Introduction

What are the most significant reasons why you will look forward to Christmas? Each of us will have our own answers that will inevitably overlap but will also have some personal distinctives. I was struck by the words of Canon Andrew White ‘the Vicar of Baghdad’, because he pastors the one remaining Anglican Church in that Iraqi city. He has been the Minister of that church for many years and sadly in that time literally hundreds of his congregation have been killed or simply ‘disappeared’ without trace. Many Christians from that country, almost certainly a majority of them have fled from their homeland hoping for some peace and security in another country. What does Christmas mean in that context? Canon White wrote the following words recently: ‘In the Western world presents are bought and copious amounts of food will be bought in preparation for the party. Decorations are prepared in the home and the towns for the great day to begin. Here in Baghdad it could not be more different. Our Christians know that the big Eid (celebration) is coming. They know that we are about to celebrate the coming of the Christ Child. But there will be no razzamatazz; the only decoration will be the Christmas tree in the church. Presents –well, there simply are not any, apart from what we get for the children and those (shoebboxes) given by Operation Christmas Child (Samaritan’s Purse, a Christian charity). For the children we will work at bringing them some joy and fun. We will dress somebody up as Papa Noel as we give children their presents. Here despite the media no longer showing our existence, we still live in violence and terrorism. I still move about my parish surrounded by hoards of soldiers and police protection, **yet we are still happy and for us there is total joy**. Christmas is for us is first and foremost a time of spiritual celebration. **We may have nothing. We may live in total turmoil, but we celebrate**. For us Christmas is simply a celebration of God coming to be amongst us in Jesus the Christ Child...so for us Christmas is simply about our Lord amongst us... There is no food and parties, but real celebration of faith. Christmas is simply a time of spiritual renewal –a time when we remember that the Lord is indeed here and His Spirit is amongst us. [ASSIST News, quoted in *Good News*, December 2013] If only all the people of our country could grasp what these Iraqi Christians had come to see about the real meaning of Christmas! But that could be a disaster for the retail trade as a high proportion of profits for the year is made in this season persuading people to buy things they may never use or require; or to offer as gifts for people who already have more that they could possibly use. To grasp in terms of presents that ‘less can be more’ as quality rather than quantity is what matters. That we value making time for the people in our lives in this season more than even the suitable and wanted gifts we may purchase for them.

What was it that brought joy that first Christmas? Luke gives us some insights in the next section of his Gospel, in Luke 2:8-20.

1. The promise of Joy

(a)The recipients of the good news (Luke 2:8) *The And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night.* We are so familiar with the story and ‘what happened’ next, that we find it hard to imagine that it could have been any other way. On the contrary, first century AD hearers and readers in Israel would have been stunned that people on the margins of society, like shepherds, would have been of any interest at all to God, let alone be the recipients of the most wonderful news revealed that day. First of all their occupation rendered these men ritually unclean –despite the fact that they were rearing the animals used for the sacrifices in the Temple! The laws of purity outlined in the book of Moses, and especially as they were interpreted by the Pharisees of New Testament days, made it nearly impossible for a large proportion of people to have the time to follow all the rules and regulations associated with the correct observance of religious traditions. The Shepherds were also drawn from the poorest social strata of society and not only did they draw very meagre wages, but also their anti-social hours meant that in practice they had little

contact with the rest of society. Their lifestyle was about as far as you could get from a '9-5 Monday to Friday' office occupation in an air-conditioned workplace. There was the added perk of being near to nature with encounters with some wild animals, though the lions and bears that had roamed those hills in King David's day had long since been hunted to extinction. In addition, because so few people wanted to become shepherds, farmers were often required to allow men who might otherwise have been regarded as unsuitable to care for the flocks. So within that society in general shepherds had quite unfairly all been tainted with the status of being considered as having questionable characters. As a result they were prevented from serving as witnesses in a court of law as evidence from a shepherd was ruled inadmissible and unreliable (all women also suffered that fate in that society). God refused to be bound by these human rules. He made a point of choosing as the first witnesses of the birth of the Messiah people whose testimony was inadmissible in court. God made exactly the same statement after the resurrection of Jesus when various women had the privilege of being the first witnesses to see Him on that occasion. The Bible is a socially challenging book that reflects its Creator who wishes to include people that others have excluded. Human social status is utterly irrelevant with God. Every human being is on the same level with Him. Don't think that God cannot use you as an ordinary person. It is those who see themselves in this way who may be of more use to God than a person who has too high an opinion of themselves!

(b) **The bringers of the good news** (Luke 2:9, 13-14) ⁹*An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.* ¹³*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,* ¹⁴*"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favour rests."* This was not a common means of communication from God, despite the number of recorded heavenly visitations of people recorded in the pages of Scripture. When you spread them out over the thousands of years of biblical history it quickly becomes evident that it was rare. It is also important to note that angelic visits were all unexpected. However, it is likely that each such occasion was of particular importance to God and as a result this was communicated directly to the human recipient of the message –in this case to the shepherds. God can speak to us in many different ways through the Scriptures as we read them; through prayer; through the advice of other people; through particular circumstances or a combination of the above items; what is important is our willingness to hear from Him about the future direction of our lives.

(c) **The importance of this good news** (Luke 2:10-12) ¹⁰*But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.* ¹¹*Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.* ¹²*This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."* **It was good news of great joy.** Too often the news we hear is bad news. People in a perverse kind of way seem to prefer it or at least fear it as newspapers sell less copies of an issue full of good news than one filled with bad news. The second important aspect of the message relates to the recipients of the message. For whom was the message given? *for all the people* –for Gentiles as well as Jews; for outcasts as well as people who are viewed as kosher; the good news is for you –whoever you are; although it only becomes good news to you when you receive it and live in the light of it. This Christmas if some relative sends you a present and it simply stays unwrapped beneath your Christmas tree then it is all a bit pointless? What is the good news? *a Saviour has been born to you* Have you trusted Jesus as your Lord and Saviour? Christmas without receiving God's gift is inevitably diminished if we do not accept His blessed gift of salvation through His Son Jesus. How do we find the Saviour? For these first hearers of the gospel it was by a clear physical sign: *You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.* For us today it is by taking a step of faith and receiving Him into our lives –have you ever said a prayer of

commitment and received Jesus as your Lord and Saviour? If you have never taken this step can I encourage you to do that today?

2. The search for joy

(a) The encounter with the God who loved them (Luke 2:9) *and they were terrified* These men were shocked by the visit of the angel and the angelic host who accompanied him. There is not a human being on the planet that would have had any other reaction –if we are honest! However, I believe it went deeper than that; here were a company of men who were aware of the existence of God and maybe even acknowledged in a general sense their need of Him, but who had been most unlikely to have done anything about it. It was very possible that some of them had done things in their lives of which they were not proud and had kept hidden from the other shepherds. Yet God knew all these things and was still willing to meet with them through the angel. The extraordinary grace of our perfect and utterly holy God, that He would address sinful human beings in this way is shocking. What is more they were men who would have been unlikely to have been allowed to attend regular worship services at the local synagogue due to being both physically smelly and ritually unclean. Yet God was prepared to reach out to people in this situation. No-one is beyond His love and forgiveness. It is a profound challenge to us not to think anyone is beyond the reach of God and the gospel. The transforming power of God can work amazing miracles beyond our limited expectations and in ways we never considered as possible. God saw what these men could become when touched by His grace –let us think about that with respect to the people we know who need Him. (b) The response from the men to His invitation (Luke 2:15-16) 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.* Did they hear the message of the angel and decide to sleep on it and come to a decision in the morning? Did they think this is too good to be true and decide to pass on the whole matter; after all who would believe them in Bethlehem that an angel would speak to mere shepherds out on the hillsides. If God was going to send a message to the nation of Israel then surely He would have spoken through a prophet or priest in Jerusalem not a country farm-worker with limited education? God chose these men. God too today chooses ordinary people like you and me to do His will –are you open to responding to His prompting? How did they respond? *Let's go to Bethlehem* (v15) is how the NIV translates this phrase. However, the emphasis is not strong enough. *The Message* version translates it in this way: *Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us.* *They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger.* There was no doubt in their minds they were 100% committed to following God's guidance for their lives. Sometimes those of us who have been on the Christian pathway for a long time can complicate things a bit too much. We sometimes need children or people young in the faith to remind us that at its heart our faith is a child-like (not childish) dependence on God. Their trust in the Word of God was absolute. How is your trust and mine in His Word written? God inspired it and used the characters and personalities of His servants of a former era to present His extraordinary revelation to us in a form that was without error and entirely trustworthy. The lie of the devil... to Eve in Genesis 3:1 *Did God really say...* has been the same down the generations as he tries to make each believer doubt the plans and purposes of our loving heavenly father. What happened when in the middle of the night they went into Bethlehem? It was a tough call whom do you ask when everyone is asleep in their beds? There were no 24-hour shops open. There were no night-clubs or pubs with a late license open. Yet they continued to ask until they *found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.* This is so important that they did not give up. Are you

searching for God –keep on going until you find Him? Are you a Christian looking for guidance from God about a particular issue and nothing has come up yet? Keep on praying God will provide an answer in His time because He rewards those people who diligently seek Him. This is guaranteed! We live in an instant society in the western world. God doesn't work on that time scale, with Him a day is the same as a thousand years or vice versa. He lives in eternity –time is part of His creation. People in some other parts of the world probably live at a pace closer to the one in heaven than the frenetic lifestyles of people in the western world! God honoured them that first Christmas. May He honour you and me this Christmas!

3. The celebration of Joy

(a) The impact of receiving the good news (Luke 2:17) ¹⁷*When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, Did they keep the gospel to themselves when they heard about it? No! it was natural to share it! Although we cannot expect every person we share the gospel with to respond with committing their life to Christ; or all accepting an invitation, for example, to attend a church service this year; but the Bible is very clear that if we keep on sowing the spiritual seed of the gospel then there will be a harvest of responses in God's time. Over the last two thousand years the pattern has been very clear that in those places in the world where the Church of Jesus Christ is growing that it is many ordinary people who are sharing their faith that has been a crucial catalyst in that growth. It has never been primarily about the great leaders we read in church history books. They of course played their vital parts, but when the army of God is on the move we can expect to see victories for God as He works by His Spirit within us. Good news is too good not to pass it on! Will you make a point of attempting, if a suitable opportunity arises, to speak to at least one person who is not yet a Christian about the true meaning and purpose of Christmas? The response is in God's hands but this is a great time of year when more people than in any other season are willing to think not only about themselves but also about others and seek to enter into the 'spirit of Christmas' –which is a reflection of God's generosity in first giving to us the greatest gift of all. No wonder Paul told the Corinthians in II Corinthians 9:15: *Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!* (b) The response from people hearing the good news (Luke 2:18) ¹⁸*and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.* What was the response of the people? Amazed...it was unbelievable –the shepherds had had a little time to accept and work through the wonderful things that had happened, but the people in Bethlehem had heard it for the first time and they wanted an opportunity to reflect on what they had heard. When we share our faith we want an instant response naturally, but we have had time to come to that decision; our hearers may have never seriously considered trusting the Lord before and may need us to be patient as we encourage them to start the journey of faith with Jesus. Very few people come to faith on the first occasion they hear the message presented clearly; a majority take months and a significant minority may take a few years of interest and exploration prior to making a commitment to Christ. Mary here also wanted time and space to reflect (2:19) on what had happened in Bethlehem: *Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.* Sometimes we need to pray for boldness to witness for our faith; on other occasions we need to pray for patience when God appears to be working at a pace less than we find acceptable! (c) The blessings that come from sharing the good news (Luke 2:20) *The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.* What was the impact of their obedience and their willingness to share their faith? The shepherds returned to the sheep pens *glorifying and**

praising God because the events that had taken place *were just as they had been told* (2:20). When you want to bless someone else with words or an action that is for their good and God's glory, then it almost certainly will bring a blessing also to your own heart and life. Pleasing God will bring His joy into our hearts. Will you and I experience this joy in good measure this Christmas? If we truly trust Him implicitly and live for Him appropriately then we too will enter the New Year rejoicing because of what the Lord has done, Amen.