

Readings for Christmas

25th December 2024

First Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named

Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Second Reading: Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope

and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Gospel: St Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

A Reflection for Christmas

from Ven John Green

There seem to be so many good reasons not to believe in God, or in Jesus as his Son. As a Chaplain in the Royal Navy for almost 20 years I heard many of them regularly from the sailors I served with, albeit mostly in the form of good-natured banter. And when it comes to Christmas, you can hardly be surprised that the messy collision of aggressive commercialism with events like school nativity plays and stories of Father Christmas in his sleigh pulled by magic reindeer, at best evoke a weary, "Christmas is for kids!" and, at worst, "Bah Humbug!"

Looking at the world we presently inhabit, beset by war and rumour of war, poverty apparently on the increase (even in relatively wealthy countries) and widespread concern about the long-term habitability of our planet, it's easy to see why stories about babies in stables being announced by singing angels and worshipped by shepherds might be dismissed as a complete, if cute, irrelevance.

But I'd ask, "What's new?" While not wanting to play down the scale, either of modern warfare or the threat posed by climate change, nonetheless violence, disaster and grinding poverty have always been with us – perhaps the issue is that modern communications make us more aware of the problems we face, or might it be growing frustration that the problems we face seem intractable. The truth is that the good news that Christmas brings has, from the very birth of the Christ-Child, been at odds with the enduring bad news that seems to accompany humanity.

I think that St Luke, who is responsible for giving us a large part the narrative of Jesus' birth, especially the child in the manger, the angels and the shepherds, is sure of two things: his utter faith in Jesus as divine; and of our human perspective being at odds with God's. It's Luke's gospel that gives us the most memorable pictures of conventional values being challenged by the *Kingdom of God* in parables like the story of *The Good Samaritan* and *The Prodigal Son*. Likewise, in Luke's narrative surrounding Jesus' birth, it's the *barren* Elizabeth that gives birth to John the Baptist, it's the *virgin* Mary that conceives Jesus, and it is poor shepherds to whom the birth of Jesus is revealed.

To understand Luke, it's essential to get things in the right order. Luke doesn't write about shepherds, angels and all the rest to prove that Jesus is special – he already accepts that as a given beyond all doubt – relating the story as he does simply reinforces what he has come to understand as God's perspective on the human understanding of power. The birth of Jesus isn't an event that stands on its own, but is part and parcel of the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ – and that's the point of view from which Luke is relating it.

Against that background, the Gospel has always been good news for bad times, and the birth of Jesus either a nice but irrelevant fiction or a sign of hope in a dark world. As much as it was 2000 years ago, the birth of Jesus, as well as his life, death and resurrection, poses a choice – where, ultimately, do we look for hope: to our own advance and progress or to God? To opt for God isn't a decision to wait patiently for an invisible friend to sort things out. It is an active commitment to the values of God's kingdom, among them humility, love and self-giving in contrast to the hubris, pride and greed which continue to bedevil humanity.

The Church of Scotland minister and hymn-writer, John Bell expresses it well thus:

Who would think that what was needed to transform and save the earth
Might not be a plan or army, proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think, despite derision, that a child should lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day.

Shepherds watch and wise men wonder, monarchs scorn and angels sing;
Such a place as none would reckon hosts a holy helpless thing;
Stable beasts and by-passed strangers watch a baby laid in hay:
God surprises earth with heaven coming here on Christmas Day.

Centuries of skill and science span the past from which we move,
Yet experience questions whether, with such progress, we improve.
While the human lot we ponder, lest our hopes and humour fray,
God surprises earth with heaven coming here on Christmas Day.

May God surprise us afresh with his love and generosity this Christmas.

