

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 24 December 2017 Christmas Eve Carols and Communion

Luke 2:1 – 7 The Birth

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 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.

Luke 2:8 – 14

The Angels

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Luke 2:15 – 20

The Shepherds

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."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

CONTEMPORARY READING

'Nativity' by Peter Cape

They were set for home but the horse went lame/
and the rain came pelting down out of the sky./ Joe
saw the hut and he went to look,/ and he said "she's old, but she'll keep you dry."

So her boy was born in a roadman's shack,/ by the light of a lamp that would hardly burn./ She
wrapped him up in her hubby's coat,/ and laid him down on a bed of fern.

Then they came riding out of the night,/ and this is the thing that she'll always swear,/ as they took off
their hats and came into the light,/ they knew they were going to find her there.

She sat at the edge of the fernstalk bed,/ and she watched, but she didn't understand,/ while they put
those bundles by the baby's head,/ that river nugget into his hand.

Then she watched as they went through the open door,/ weary as men who have ridden too far./ And
the rain eased off and the low cloud broke,/ and through the gap shone a single star

Years ago my mother and I went to the small Salvation Army Corps in Queenstown for a night just like
this – it was Sunday and Christmas Eve at the same time. The little congregation was mounting a
nativity Play by the children of their Sunday School. Some of you have heard me talk of the way the

little shepherds had obviously been told to bow down at the words “Fear Not” for they did so instantly and obediently, as if they were puppets worked by invisible strings! We already had had the three kings appear – as the script was the usual mixture of the Matthew story with the kings and Herod and the Luke story with the shepherds and the angels. So, one small Sunday school had already produced a Joseph and a Mary, a Herod, three wise ones, three shepherds – I was beginning to think that we would soon be running out of actors. I knew we had the heavenly host to arrive yet! I looked round, up the aisle. Three adorable angels were slowly advancing towards the front. I whispered to my mother “Here come the multitude of the heavenly host”. She turned round too, and we both got the giggles. The young female Army officer who was the narrator was most displeased and frowned awfully at us which of course made the giggles worse! A splendid time can be had surfing youtube watching nativity plays with similar incongruities.

As a child, this mysterious symbolic set of stories, serving as an overture to the symphony which is Jesus’ life, this magical mysterious narrative captured me completely as it has the world. There’s something about this collection of symbols – tender mother, protective father, innocent child, surrounded by smelly rough shepherds and smooth silken strangers and those angels lighting up the night sky. All of them signposts to what Jesus will be and who he is. A contemplative, born of a mother who “treasured these things and pondered them in her heart.” A practical man who knew from his father Joseph what it needed to make a yoke which was easy to bear. A learned teacher, steeped in the wisdom of the east and the west. A man of the people, as easy with those who worked the land and tended sheep as with those who made learned arguments. The writers of these two Gospels tell us through these birth narratives that all of this we will see in the life which is about to unfold before us.

I want to talk to you tonight about darkness. Darkness also runs through this story of this birth, a foil to the glint of gold, the sparkle of starlight, of angelic aura and the soft light of a middle eastern oil lamp. This darkness has many layers too – each a signpost to what is truly important. There is the darkness of Roman occupation. The dark deviousness of politics colours the backdrop of this birth. Placed on stage by Matthew are wise strangers from the East who consult the ruling authorities of the day, and tangle with Herod, cruel and self-centred civic leader, puppet of the occupying Roman Empire.

Through this darkness and into this night bursts the star. Possibly the so-called Christmas star was a rare planetary alignment in the year 6 BC, during which the sun, Jupiter, the moon, and Saturn all lay in the constellation Aries. For the astrologers of the time, Jupiter and the moon together would represent the birth of a ruler with a special destiny while Saturn was a symbol of giving life. Aries marks the start of spring, also a time of new life. The meaning of this story doesn’t depend on either a star or a planetary alignment being true, the star is as much a character in this drama as any person and it brings light into darkness.

The shepherds are doing their work in the dark. They are at the bottom of their world, those whom general society would like to keep out of sight and out of mind, yet they are involved in this birth which is being written up in such special terms by the Gospel writers. Jesus comes not only to the learned wise and politically important but also to the lowly and humble on the edge of respectability, regarded as untrustworthy by the law of the land.

The room where the child is born is dark. You don’t waste precious lamp oil on animals. Imagine the warmth animal bodies, the rustle of straw perhaps, the sharp reek of dung, homely and earthy and basic dark.

We, like Mary, need to take the time to ponder this story in the deep dark places of our hearts. It is good you came here tonight to do so. To take that time. When we have pondered the important in our innermost selves, we are better equipped to do the important in our world. For there is a different

kind of darkness in our world a Herod and Roman Empire kind of darkness which needs rolling back. We need to roll it back with our weapons of justice and freedom, compassion and courage. We can do that during the year if in moments like this we take time to know our own darkness and let the warm darkness of this birth integrate with it.

Much treasure can be gained from the deep, dark depths of this mine of truth which is these birth narratives. Let me name them slowly, leaving a short silence between each treasure so you can ponder them.

The star tells us:

Into darkness will come light...

The shepherds tell us:

*Even if you feel side-lined and ignored by society,
there can be amazing moments of revelation entrusted to you...*

The travellers from the Easter tell us:

Wisdom often appears from a direction you might not have thought of at first...

This birth tells us:

Greatness begins with very, very small beginnings...

And it tells us:

*Even if the stable of your life is dark and rough and ready,
new life can be born within it....*

Other sacred truths such as these reside deep in the creativity dark womb within you. There are companions on the spiritual way who can help you access them. You might find them here, or out on in the field, maybe even while you are watching your flocks at night, a multitude of the heavenly host might just interrupt your mundane day with light and life and glory. So keep watch.

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