

Every Christmas I like to take a theme to help me think through Xmas and this year it is the angels.

These words in Luke 2:8-14 are some of the best known in the Bible. The story is so well known and so when you come to look at it as we do today I know I run the risk of just saying what you've heard before a bit like telling old jokes. Such as, why did the orange stop rolling down the hill? Because it had run out of juice. Why don't polar bears eat penguins, because they can't get the wrappers off.

Well anyway I want to spend a few minutes looking at this account from Luke of the events of the birth of Jesus Christ so that, as we approach the annual celebration of that birth we have it clear in our minds what it was all about.

Obviously for us sitting here in Chineham in Dec 2008 to get into what was happening just outside Bethlehem in Israel centuries ago is not easy. The contrast between now and then is stark but then as we look at the event it is the contrasts that stand out. So as we go through these verse we will look at those contrasts.

The setting

Let's look at the setting of this event recorded for us by Luke.

The setting was some fields outside Bethlehem v8, "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night." Here we come to the first contrast. The shepherds were looking after their flocks and it was night. It was dark and then v9, "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them." In the darkness of the night the glory of God shone. In the dark there was light. The very words take us back to the prophecy given to Isaiah and which is a familiar part of Christmas, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." God has shone his light into the darkness of the world. This was what Zechariah had said would happen as we look back to the end of Luke 1:78-79, "because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." But the mention at the end there of peace takes us ahead a bit too quickly. I want us to simply see the setting and it is not just some fields outside Bethlehem it is a world at odds with God. A world where despite all that God has done for his people over centuries there was a lack of understanding of God and a rejection of him and his will. The setting into which the light of the world came was a setting of darkness. I remember some years back going to a place called Morwellham Quay. It is a museum and visitor centre on the River Tamar in Devon. As part of the visit we went on a small train into a mine. It was pretty dark but the light at the front of the train and various lights down the tunnel helped us to see and to feel comfortable. But then the train stopped and all the lights went out and it was dark, very, very dark indeed. Then suddenly a soft light shone on the figure of a miner at the end of the tunnel. The light helped us not just to see the figure but also ourselves as well. The light changes things and then as now the world's need was light that would help us see and know God and through that to see ourselves as we really are.

It that was the setting then next we get

The sign.

The message of the angels was short but clear, v10-12, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

The message was of a Saviour. The reason he was the Saviour is to be found in his nature he is Christ and he is the Lord. How can this one born in Bethlehem be the Saviour? Because he is the Christ, that is the Messiah, the one appointed, authorised and empowered for that role by God the Father. But he is even more than that for he is the Lord. The title leaves us in no doubt about the nature of the one born because already in just over a chapter Luke has used this word nearly twenty times as the title for God. What the angels were saying was that God has been born, as has been expected and spoken about for centuries, in order to bring about salvation. As one writer puts it, "Through him is to be done God's saving work, for to him is given God's authority, and he is himself God come in the flesh."

Here we come to the second contrast. It is the contrast of poverty and majesty. The contrast appears in a number of ways. The first is that it was to shepherds that the angels appear. It was too the poor not the rich. The messengers of God appeared to these ordinary working men who lived very much on the margins of society. It helps us to see that what God was doing was not just for some select band, some inner group. The announcement of the birth was not within the immediate family but to the poor and humble. It was a sign of inclusion and it rings to us down the centuries that the saviour who came was not for a certain sector of society be that the rich, or the famous, or the religious, or the intellectual not even just to the Jewish people but for the poor, the marginalised, the weak, the outsiders in short he came as a saviour for all the people.

A second part of the contrast just briefly is that when heaven broke into earth it was not in temple but field. The heavenly host appeared not at the heart of the temple in Jerusalem but in some fields outside Bethlehem.

But of course the greatest aspect of this contrast of majesty and poverty is the fact that the child was born in a barn. He was born in humility not splendour. "The wealth of these acclamations stand in contrast to the poverty of the sign." All glory and splendour has been left behind with all status and power and God was born as a baby dependent upon others. Born not in palace or temple but in a stable. The sign helps us to see something of what God is about here. Here there is a change of the way of doing things. The status quo is turned upside down. God does not come to the rich. He is not concerned with the trappings of wealth or splendour. When God appeared it was not announced in the temple but a field he was born as man and didn't just appear in supra-human form and he was born not in a palace but a stable. In this way we begin to see the nature of the Kingdom of God and understand that this kingdom is different. So Jesus told his disciples that they enter the kingdom by becoming like a little child. Further Jesus told the disciples that in the Kingdom of God the first would be last and that the greatest would be the servant of all. These are the themes we see here in this

amazing contrast whereby the King of Kings was born in the back yard of a pub.

I do think for us as we seek to follow Jesus in every way this is a key lesson to understand. Just as James and John had to learn it wasn't about status and power so do we. At the heart of the kingdom of God is poverty, not in the sense of being financially poor but of being willing to deny ourselves and to put others before us.

As we look at our discipleship where are we revealing majesty, a sense of pride or arrogance in the way we live out our lives? It is in our Bible knowledge, our prayer life, our ability to care for people, where do we need to learn poverty?

Those familiar words from Phil 2:3-7 come to mind, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

So in the setting there was a contrast between darkness and light. In the sign there was a contrast between majesty and poverty.

The significance

Finally we come to the significance of the whole event. The significance of course is that God has sent a Saviour into the world and the immense contrast here is that of favour instead of wrath. We see this in the message of the hosts of angels in 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests." The message is that there is peace to those to whom God shows his favour. But the bottom line is that none of us deserve that favour. I'm not sure how many youngsters will have brought home reports at the end of this term. Mine so often said "could do better". But God's report for all of us is "failure". As Paul tells us we have all fallen short of God's standard because none of us is perfect, not even Mary Poppins who was only practically perfect. We know that we have rebelled against God and we deserve his wrath, his holy anger. But the message of these angels was not of anger but peace and not of wrath but favour and it is all centred upon Jesus.

Recently there was a report in the press of 17-year-old Natalie Beveridge who helped to save little Phoenix Scott's life. Phoenix's Mum had just stepped off a bus near KFC on Northumberland Street on Thursday, November 6, when the baby started choking for breath. Suffering what is believed to be a fit, Phoenix was shaking before suffering complete respiratory failure.

The mother screamed and Natalie, coming out of the KFC, took over phoning the emergency services and taking instructions from the operator, helping to lie the infant down to clear his airways until the paramedics arrived.

This Christmas and I'm sure every Christmas Phoenix and his family will be thankful for Natalie saving his life.

This Christmas, next Christmas and every day in between we should be thankful for our salvation and through that recognise that because of Christ we no longer face the wrath of God but we know his favour and blessing.

The setting gives us a contrast between dark and light. The sign between poverty and majesty and the significance between wrath and favour.

The message of the angels is a clear message for us today and is indeed good news of great joy for all people.