

**Reading: Isaiah Chapter 9 verses 2 – 7**

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.  
You have enlarged the nation  
and increased their joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as people rejoice at the harvest,  
as men rejoice  
when dividing the plunder.  
For as in the day of Midian's defeat,  
you have shattered  
the yoke that burdens them,  
the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor.  
Every warrior's boot used in battle  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be destined for burning,  
will be fuel for the fire.  
For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Of the increase of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and for ever.  
The zeal of the LORD Almighty  
will accomplish this.

**Reading: Luke Chapter 2 verses 1 – 14**

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 his 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 room for them in the inn.  
There were shepherds living out in the fields near by, 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 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."  
Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,  
"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."  
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.

## Reflection

Boris Johnson, faced with increasing pressure to re-consider the 5-day window of relaxations for Christmas, firmly asserted “It would be inhumane to cancel Christmas”. Of course, he was only talking about the social / familial festivities that so many were undoubtedly planning for those 5-days. As it turned out, the pressure became irresistible and the 5-day window was reduced to a single day – 25<sup>th</sup> December. At one level, his words were ridiculous. You can’t cancel a 2000-year-old event and it is that event that we celebrate today.

A few weeks ago now, I got an email from Joanne in the office. She had received details of a number of opportunities that will be available to help with the 2021 Census. So next year, after a disastrous 2020, the government will be once again taking the once-a-decade census that will count the number of people in the United Kingdom, where they live, what they do and, perhaps most interestingly for us, what they believe. It seems slightly ironic standing here at this moment of change to be considering a census – both to come and one that took place 2000-years ago. Our reading from Luke’s Gospel, reminds us of the circumstances that surrounded the first Christmas. The Emperor also wanted to know how many people lived in the Empire – so that he could tax them. As a result, Joseph – along with Mary who was betrothed to him – had to return to his home town – Bethlehem. It didn’t matter that he didn’t live there anymore – he still had to go. It wasn’t an easy trip for Mary – mind you, none of the Christmas cards seem to show that. She was heavily pregnant so travel was both unwelcome and uncomfortable. It is most likely that, in her delicate condition, she had to walk – did you notice that Luke makes no reference to there being a donkey!!

When Joseph and Mary got to Bethlehem, they discovered that everyone else had got to Bethlehem ahead of them. As a result, wherever they asked, there was no room at the inn or anywhere else. No doubt, with increasing desperation beginning to set in, they were very relieved when one place offered them space in the stable – the place where the animals were usually kept. Mary had little time left in her pregnancy and so it was that she gave birth to her baby in that stable and had nowhere else to place the baby except to wrap him in swaddling clothes and lay him in the manger – the device normally used to feed the oxen, cattle and other animals. So it was that at this first Christmas when divinity stooped to take on human flesh and be born in a stable. The Son of God was born not in a place, not in a rich man’s house, but in a stable.

Luke’s Gospel reminds us that – the same day as the birth – there were shepherds out on the hill. They were there looking after their sheep. Society saw them as the lowest of the low. They were dirty, often out on the hillside when the religious festivals took place in the Temple – if, indeed, they were deemed clean enough to even attend, which is unlikely. And yet, it was to these lowly shepherds that an Angel appeared and told them of the birth of the Saviour and Messiah. Religiously-speaking, this was the most anticipated, most important, birth ever. And yet, the Angel told the shepherds that the baby had been born and that the sign that it was the Messiah was that the baby was born in the stable and wrapped in swaddling clothes. As if an Angel appearing to a lowly group of shepherds wasn’t surprising enough, the Heavenly Host appeared giving glory to, and praising, God and promising peace on earth. To a people – the Jews – living under the rule of an occupying Roman army peace on earth must seemed a pipedream.

I wonder what the facial expressions and words were that passed between the surprised shepherds. They could easily have dismissed the message as imaginary – but they didn’t. Instead, they rushed off down the hills into Bethlehem and eagerly sought out the baby in the manger. When they found, they were possibly speechless. Having seen the baby, they went away telling anyone who would

listen about what they had heard and seen – small wonder that the people they met were amazed at what they were told.

Important as the news of the birth of Jesus himself as, Luke wants us to hear that no one is beyond the reach of the Gospel – the message of peace and goodwill and the joy and the Saviour had come. Equally though, Luke wants us to here that the lowliest – the Shepherds – were capable of telling others what they had heard and seen and the effect that it had had upon them. We need to hear that message afresh. I know it isn't easy to talk to others about our faith – and I don't want to deny that in any way. But, if uneducated Shepherds can tell others then surely can't we? It doesn't mean that we have to stand on a street corner and proclaim the words of the Bible. However, what any of us can do is to say a quiet word to others as part of a conversation about the environment, ethics, the way we approach matters. One word may be all it takes – and we might just be the right person in the right place at the right time to say it. Let us – like the Shepherds – find the courage to tell what we have seen and heard that others may come to worship the Christ-child.

However, as the carol 'Once in Royal David's City' reminds us, "Not in that poor lowly stable we shall see him". The baby that we see on so many Christmas cards not still in the stable but rather – having gone to the cross to pay the price of our sins – and raised from the dead by God is now seated at the right-hand of the Father in glory and lives to intercede for us.