

Reflection for Christmas by Rev'd Michael Last

As we once again celebrate Christmas let me remind you of two verses from our scripture readings. The first comes from Isaiah, and the second is St Paul writing to Titus - two verses that encapsulate much of the very essence of Christmas.

*"The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.*

*They lived in a land of shadows,
but now light is shining on them."*

"For God has revealed his grace for the salvation of the whole human race. ... He gave himself for us, to rescue us from all wickedness and to make us a pure people who belong to him alone and are eager to do good."

Christmas is a time that creates memories that linger with us for the rest of our lives. May years ago, during my twenties, I remember one particular Christmas night quite vividly. It was long before my ordination and I was working for BT, shift working, and in this particular year it was my turn to work Christmas night. I was alone in a large BT building in London with only the humming of equipment racks for company. It was one of those nights when nothing happened so, to pass the small hours, I had the radio on and I recall the presenter, between records, charting Santa's route across the London skyline.

Then in the morning, after a quiet night, I was relieved and drove home through the gray deserted streets of London. It was almost as if Christmas had never happened – I had missed the event completely – that was until I walked through the front door!

In many ways, I am sure those shepherds, as they settled down in the fields for the night, watching and guarding their sheep on the first Christmas Eve, must have hoped for some sort of night - quiet, uneventful and boring.

Yet, as our gospel reminds us, their peace was to be shattered by the intrusion of an angel - an angel who brings a message: *"Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people."* Words that announced the greatest moment in history: the moment the light of God came into the world, or as John in his gospel puts it *"The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us."* This was the moment God began to reveal his grace for salvation; these Shepherds having the privilege of being the very first to know and to witness the events: no livestreaming or internet in those days.

Like so many key events in history, I wonder if those shepherds, as they excitedly set off for Bethlehem to see this newborn child, really understood the reality of what had happened and that they were witnessing. The more one studies the story of Christmas, not in the form that we so often see in nativity plays, a montage of elements from all the gospels and tradition, but look at the way the individual gospel writers tell the story, the more the story deepens and the magnitude of what is happening comes to the fore. The more it challenges us to ask again and again, what does the reality of incarnation mean - not just that first Christmas as the events unfolded, but today? What does it say to you, me and the world in which we live today? It's a world where there is still so much darkness, so much that is wrong, so much pain and suffering.

Luke, in his account of the events focuses on Mary - that young girl from a backwater called Nazareth, and the birth of her son, whose first night is spent in a stone animal trough. Why? Because there was no room at the inn. A very lowly and precarious beginning.

The Shepherds, those first visitors, folk on the very edge of the community, ritually unclean because of their work.

Here, right at the beginning of the gospel, a statement is being made that this child Jesus, "God with us", has come to break down the barriers we as humanity so often create.

If you are on the edge of society, in whatever way, this is a message of hope for you. God loves us all, and that message - the Good News - is still the same and a relevant today.

On that first Christmas night God, rather than turning his back on humanity - which had and still does walk away from him so purposefully, was holding out his love and his grace in the most profound and the most undeserved way –through the incarnation of his son.

God had become human in the person of Jesus: not seeking to judge or condemn, but to save and to guide us back to God - to reveal to us who God is and how much he loves each one of us.

As John puts it his gospel *“For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.”*

This is again picked up right at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel as he recalls Mary’s words as she visits her cousin Elizabeth - words which we call the Magnificat

“His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

If you are on the edge or weighed down by so much in this world, or affected by violence and conflict these are words of hope. Hope of a world not just with issues covered up with some sort of sticking plaster, but a world that is radically changed. One might even say these words are revolutionary. This is the enormity of Christmas, the incarnation and its message.

God, at that first Christmas, was giving us the greatest Christmas present - his Son who would give all for us, who would die for us and rise again victorious.

When we open our presents, if we have not already done so, will we stop for a moment, and reflect on the gift God gave to us, the gift of his Son - that we might have a living relationship with God. The glitter and tinsel of Christmas are great, providing they do not mask God’s gift which lies underneath.

I cannot imagine for one moment that having seen and experienced what they did those shepherds have gone away untouched in the most profound way.

As we celebrate and reflect on the light and the love of God that dawned on that first Christmas morning it should change us not just internally but externally as well. As Paul puts it to Titus it should begin *to make us a pure people who belong to him (Jesus) alone and are eager to do good.*

As that light grows brighter in each one of us, so should the kingdom of God and, with it, the effect on the wider world.

Those shepherds, as they settled down for the night, can hardly have expected to be given a message that was so wonderful, so earth shattering.

The message of God with us – the incarnation.

The message of God’s love that never fails us and offers us love and grace.

The message of hope and fullness of life that comes through the salvation that Christ child would win.

A message for the past? No! A message that is as relevant today as then.

“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 Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

“For God has revealed his grace for the salvation of the whole human race. ... He gave himself for us, to rescue us from all wickedness”