

The Angels and The Shepherds

Like most of our congregation, I too have, in the past week or two, dined out on the singing of Carols and the adoration of the Christ Child, born in a manger. In doing this, I have followed what for me, is a life long immersion in the story of this holy birth, the appearance of the Angels, and the fulfilment of the promise that the Messiah would come to us. I was further reminded of all this when I listened to the King's Christmas message. Those of you who saw his broadcast would remember that recently, he had visited Bethlehem. There was a scene in which, King Charles, flanked on one side by an Orthodox bishop, and on the other side, a Roman Catholic Cardinal, stood alongside the embedded star that marks the very spot where Jesus was born. Once again, a sacred site. Standing there, would evoke a significant spiritual experience. This is the spot where Scripture was fulfilled and a new covenant offered.

There is however, a problem here. As the story is repeated and romantically expanded, the angelic choirs and the shepherds in the field, should draw our attention to a very special event. Too often however, although we see the infant Christ in the cradle, what really draws our attention, is the Angelic Choirs, the shepherds, and the three wise men.

Within my family, there is a similar kind of issue. We have some amazing stories. We can sit around our camp fire in awe and listen to our family stories. While we in fact, soak up these stories and want to hear them over and over again, it is also true that with some frequency, those of us who have been players in the stories, find

ourselves saying things like....*"That was a great story, but actually, some of it has been filtered through rose coloured glasses. The story is basically correct in detail, but a fair bit of poetic licence has modified what actually happened."*

Now, let me say at once, that I am not suggesting that the manger scene did not happen. Sometimes however, the soul stirring imagery of angelic choirs can have the effect of dressing up some of the detail in such a way, that the real meaning of the birth event, is overshadowed. Indeed, sometimes, the detail is lost

One writer who I have read on this matter, talks about our 'distracted culture' and 'our restless souls'. For our 'distracted culture' read the heavenly choirs. We are naturally drawn to wonderful soul stirring events. For restless souls, read our modern trials in a time of the escalating cost of living.

He says; In the wonderful play *The Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever*, a family of poor kids—aptly named Herdman—hijack a children's Christmas pageant, taking all the choice roles by intimidation and force. As the performance degenerates into chaos, the youngest Herdman, who plays the angel announcing Messiah's birth to the shepherds, yells out over the din, "Hey! Unto you a child is born!" Thankfully, the great good news of Jesus' birth, the event of the incarnation, can still cut through the noise of our distracted culture and our own restless souls.¹

¹ REDMAN, R., "Theological Perspective on Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)", *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (ed. D. L. BARTLETT – B. B. TAYLOR) (Louisville, KY 2009) I, 116.

I wonder how many of you have noticed in the Christmas staple film diet of 'Love Actually', that nativity scenes these days, include Spiderman and an Octopus.

Moving on from the nativity, The first baby steps of the infant Jesus were the fulfilment of the age-old covenant promise: "And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:12).²

If you sense a demurring in what I said about the dramatic announcement by the Angels, then hopefully, you will also be alert to my bringing the shepherds into foreground.

The announcement to the shepherds indicates the social location of the incarnation. One might expect the Son of God to be born in more dignified surroundings and celebrated by more upscale admirers. In the first of many "great reversals," God bypasses the proud and the powerful (Luke 1:51-52) in favour of a stable surrounded by livestock and visited by lowly shepherds—"not ... enfolded in Tyrian purple, but ... wrapped with rough pieces of cloth ... not ... in an ornate golden bed, but in a manger." Bede quotes from 2 Corinthians, "Though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich."

While it is clear that Christ came to be Saviour for all persons, rich and poor alike, it is also equally clear that God chose to dwell among

² REDMAN, R., "Theological Perspective on Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)", *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (ed. D. L. BARTLETT – B. B. TAYLOR) (Louisville, KY 2009) I, 118.

the least and the lost. Shepherds had little status and did menial work for low pay. Yet God has “lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52) by making humble shepherds the first to visit him. Thus the Saviour spent his first hours surrounded by the lost ones whom he came to seek and save (Luke 19:10). Jesus’ later practices underscored the earthiness of the incarnation as he chose to be with the poor, the marginalized, and the outcast.³

Now if we are ‘listeners of the story’ it might be that we are tempted to symbolically pull up a chair, arm ourselves with mug of hot chocolate and listen to the stirring tales of the Angelic Choirs and the three wise men over and over again, but as my late friend Fr Derm was want to say, that is not what we should be doing if we want to call ourselves disciples. Indeed our starting point is to recognise that here in this sacred nativity, we come face to face with Hope. What we are called to do, is embrace that Hope. In our out-reach to the lonely and the lost; those who are bewildered and lost in this secular world, our expected outcome should be an embracing of Hope.

³ REDMAN, R., “Theological Perspective on Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)”, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (ed. D. L. BARTLETT – B. B. TAYLOR) (Louisville, KY 2009) I, 118-120.