

Bishop Paul's Christmas Sermon at Midnight Communion in Southwell Minster 2020 – Luke 2:1-14

Christmas 2020 will not be one we easily forget. It is not only the sudden drop in temperature that makes it feel a rather bleak midwinter. There will be a fair few who feel this Christmas has lost its shine before the day even gets started.

Yet the story we participate in this holy night has all the shine needed for two thousand Christmases and more. It has been celebrated in times of national testing and personal tragedy.

Most of us will have known Christmas when a painful loss was amplified or a deep disappointment cruelly exposed. But this year we share a struggle and face the fears that have been stalking our nation since mid-March. So how can the sacred events we recall this night fill our lives and our world with bright hope for this Christmas and the year to come?

Luke records *'There were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock'*. They had no idea that this would become the most famous night

in history and they would have a walk on part in the birth of the Saviour of the world.

Luke continues, *'An angel stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around, and they were terrified.'* No wonder. It would have been a terrible shock even if this had happened to priests ministering at the temple in Jerusalem, but for shepherds on a hillside near a small town that had its heyday long ago, this was truly unprecedented. The angel spoke into their fear, at least enough for them to take in the greatest announcement ever made: *"To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."*

What happens next is the celestial equivalent of a flash mob, the like of which will never be surpassed: *"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'"*

This is not an overly excited angelic choir providing a backing track for the miracle birth. The Greek word for 'host' is a military term used for an army of elite soldiers in formation with a confident battle plan.

It's the origin of our word 'strategy'. This is more than a rescue mission – a new Kingdom is being established.

God's glory is not a shining halo to brighten the gloom, it is more like the feeling you get when someone of great stature and unrivalled influence arrives in the middle of a crisis with a decisive plan.

The emphasis on the 'sudden' appearance of the 'host' is meant to indicate that their praise – vital and spontaneous – was the only fitting response to what had just been announced. God's full glory would be revealed in the face of a baby and unfold in the plan of salvation his life and, above all, his death would achieve.

It may seem that heaven went to a lot of effort to impress the glory of God on these lowly shepherds, like a stunning carol service sung to a limited few. But of course, we now understand what they could not have imagined: that the sights and sounds they heard that night would be retold to an audience of many hundreds of millions in the years to come.

We may not hear the angel voices this Christmas – who knows – but we can go to the source of that shining glory. To the One who strangely and wonderfully was not found in a palace or on a military parade ground but in a manger, because there was no room for him: here is the Prince of Peace starting his mission by entering into our full and frail humanity: he knows our struggles, our temptations and our fears.

Luke is inviting us, like the shepherds, to decide what we will do with the invitation given to us and chose to go without delay to the ultimate source of unspeakable joy and peace, which is Jesus.

This Christmas may be unlike any we have known before – we may not see the people we would love to and for some there will be an acute sense of loneliness, but nothing can take the *real* shine off Christmas. No amount of financial problems, or job worries, or health concerns or relational brokenness can do that. Whatever the level of Covid infections recorded on Christmas Day, the good news of God cannot be devalued or diminished. A saviour has been born for the whole world.

Here is the glory of God, where heaven touches earth with a love so tender and true, that it dispels the darkness of sin and shame, destroying the power of death itself, so that we may, if we chose, enter into a relationship with God and abundance of life that can be ours now and eternally.

No wonder the angels could not stay silent that holy night. We may not be able to sing in church but we can all join the praises of the angels to offer worship from the heart – vital and spontaneous. Like our ‘clapping for carers’ on Thursdays back in the Spring. As well, to give thanks for those who this Christmas will care for the sick and the dying in hospitals, care homes and the community – indeed all our frontline workers. Their heroic service has been an inspiration. May it also inspire us to greater acts of kindness and compassion in the days to come, so that our future as a nation is not defined by trade deals or hard borders but by the virtues and values that are signs of God’s kingdom into which all are invited to come through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him – give my heart.*

Christina Rossetti