

Luke 2: 1-20; Isaiah 62.6-12; Titus 3.4-7

Christmas Eve 2013 - St Andrew's Totteridge - 11:30 p.m.

This terrible weather we've been experiencing, on top of all the snow we've had over a number of winters recently, reminded me of a Christmas story I heard a few years ago and which I'd like to share with you tonight.

A farmer found it very hard to believe in Christmas, because he couldn't understand what it was all about. This made him rather grumpy and negative. But his wife was different: she wanted to go to church on Christmas morning, to share in the happiness, and join in with the carols. 'Why don't you come with me?' she asked her husband. 'I'm sure you'd enjoy it.' But, as usual, he refused. 'I just can't accept that God became a human being,' he said. 'Why would he want to do such a thing? It's nonsense!' And he went off into the kitchen to sharpen the knives before preparing lunch.

So the farmer's wife, looking a little disappointed, shrugged her shoulders and left for church alone. But it began to snow, and as the wind got up, the snowfall turned into a blizzard. 'I hope the missus will be alright,' the farmer thought, 'but she has her mobile, and can call for help if she gets into trouble'. Suddenly, there was a loud thump. Something had hit the window. The farmer looked out, but saw nothing except the snow.

An hour or so later, when the weather had improved, he ventured outside. In a field next to the house he saw a flock of wild geese. They had been flying south for the winter, but had become trapped by the blizzard, and disorientated. They were on the ground, lost, stranded, exhausted, and without food or shelter. They were in danger, as it looked like the snow would return. All they could do, in their fear and confusion, was stay put. One of them must have flown into the window, hence the thump.

The farmer felt concern for the geese, and wanted to help them. The barn is warm and safe, he thought, and the birds could rest there until they regained their strength and sense of direction. So he walked over to the barn and opened the doors. He watched and waited, hoping the geese would see the barn and go inside. But the geese didn't seem to realize

what the farmer had done to try to help them. He waved his arms and tried to drive the birds into the barn, but this only made them more frightened. The farmer then went back inside the house to get bread to lay a trail from the field into the barn, but the geese still didn't catch on. Nothing the man could do made any difference, and the geese were now at serious risk from another approaching storm.

'Why don't you follow me?' shouted the farmer in frustration. 'Can't you see I am trying to rescue you? Go into the barn!' But then he paused to think. Geese were nervous of human beings. 'If I were a goose,' he said to himself, 'I could save them. I would be one of them, and they would trust me.' Then he had an idea. He went into the barn, picked up one of his own geese – and carried it outside to the far side of the flock of wild geese. Then holding it high, he released it. The bird flew through the stranded flock, and straight back into the familiar barn! Seeing one of their own, the wild geese followed, until all were safely inside.

The farmer watched silently. Then the words he had spoken to himself only a short time before came back to him. 'If I were a goose, I could save them.' And it was at this point that quite suddenly, the Christmas message began to make sense to him. God so loved the world, so loved all of us, he became one with us - became a human being - to show where happiness, hope, freedom, and responsibility were to be found.

Human history, and so much of what we are like now, resembles those wild geese: all over the place, confused, lost, and with a badly damaged compass. God had sent numerous warnings: the prophets of the Old Testament, the scriptures, the lessons of history, signs of his guiding presence – but all had been ignored. Human beings thought they knew better. The babe of Bethlehem – his own son – was the ultimate loving attempt to put things right. The Christmas story is about God being here, with us, alongside us. Here to share in all aspects of our lives: that which makes us laugh and love, feel good about ourselves – and sometimes not so good – strive to achieve, and contribute. He is here in our tears, disappointments, and regrets. He identifies with it all, and with us all.

Jesus' birthday is a time of happy celebration, and thanksgiving. *Emmanuel – God with us.* And for a while the world forgets its divisions. And those who are homeless, hungry, lonely, poor and distressed, are

attended to – and rightly so. And we feel guilty about others who are still left out – and rightly so. For God himself provides the example of how it should be, but there was no room for him either.

But when the party is over, and the Christmas decorations and cards are taken down, and the crib goes back in its box until next December, and things return to normal, what then? Well, the shepherds couldn't stay long in the stable – they had sheep to look after. The wise men had to go home – they also had responsibilities. The Holy Family eventually returned to Nazareth, Joseph to his carpenter's bench. Christmas comes, but none of us can stay very long. We all have to go back to our ordinary, everyday lives.

But in that ordinariness, God remains with us. The evils and darkness of the world do not permanently vanish because of Christmas. We might wish it, but we know it is not so. What Christmas does – and it stretches far beyond the 25<sup>th</sup> December – is to assure us that in all life's challenges, we are cared for, known, loved, mended, strengthened, healed, forgiven, and confirmed. Somehow we came through that awful time. From nowhere, so it seemed, came courage, and even peace. There was, for most of us, a fresh chance, a new beginning, a new hope.

God with us. There, in the hospital ward, the Night Shelter, the graveside, in the devastation of shattered dreams, in the front room of the old lady alone with her memories. There, in the joy of a family putting up the Christmas tree with all its decorations. There, around the table enjoying the Christmas dinner. There, opening the presents with the children. God with us. For real. So enjoy Christmas! Enjoy it all! But we, of all people, should remember whose day it is – and be profoundly thankful.

Blessed are you  
O Christmas Christ,  
that your cradle was so low that shepherds,  
poorest and simplest of earthly folk,  
could yet kneel beside it,  
and look level-eyed into the face of God. Amen.                   (Anon)

A very Happy and Holy Christmas to you all!

## Luke 2: 1-20    The Birth of Jesus

2:1

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.<sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.<sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered.<sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.<sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.<sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.<sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

## The Shepherds and the Angels

2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.<sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.<sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:<sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.<sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'<sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,<sup>14</sup> 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.'<sup>16</sup> So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.<sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;<sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.<sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.<sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

## Isaiah 62.6-12

<sup>6</sup> Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind the Lord, take no rest,<sup>7</sup> and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth.<sup>8</sup> The Lord has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have laboured;<sup>9</sup> but those who garner it shall eat it and praise the Lord, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts.

<sup>10</sup> Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples.<sup>11</sup> The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, 'See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.'<sup>12</sup> They shall be called, 'The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord'; and you shall be called, 'Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.'

## Titus 3.4-7

<sup>4</sup> But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared,<sup>5</sup> he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour,<sup>7</sup> so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

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## Welcome and Introduction

The celebration of Christ's incarnation at Christmas is one of the two poles of the Christian year. The wonderful mystery of God's dwelling among us in the fullness of humanity, as Emmanuel, 'God with us,' *light the Advent Candles* prepared by the patriarchs, foretold by the prophets, prepared by John the Baptist, and born of Mary:

Hark, hark, the wise eternal word,  
like a weak infant cries!  
In form of servant is the Lord,  
and God in cradle lies.

*(Thomas Pestel)*

But Christmas is much more than just the celebration of Jesus' birth, it reminds us, amidst all the joyful customs and celebrations of Christmas, of the central truth of the Word made flesh for our salvation.

*Prayer:*

Lord, in this night, heaven is come down to earth, and earth is raised to heaven. In this holy night, Christians the world over celebrate Christ's birth. Open our hearts that he may be born in us today. Amen.