

**31 December 2017**

**Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3 and Luke 2:15-21**

### **Glorifying and Praising God**

We are told that the shepherds went to Bethlehem to look for what they had been told about and that when they found what they were looking for, they had more to tell, which excited those who heard them. And then they returned to where they had come from, rejoicing and praising God.

The gospel reading starts rather abruptly and to be honest, if you hadn't been at the nativity, at the carol service or at the services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, or if you are encountering this for the first time, you wouldn't have a clue what is going on. Context is all.

So, I am not going to assume you know, instead I'm going to give you the context and I'm going to invite you to feel part of the context.

I'd like you to get comfortable. Relax, have both feet on the floor. Rest your hands in your lap. Make sure your shoulders are down, not up around your ears. Close your eyes if it helps, because the action takes place at night. You are probably hungry, you are probably cold. You are working, sitting out in the open at night, watching over your flocks of sheep, watching for wolves, watching for sheep that might wander away. You may be sleepy.

And then, boy oh boy, an angel of the Lord is standing in front of you, the place must have lit up, for the glory of the Lord is shining. You are terrified.

But the angel says: do not be afraid. I have good news of great joy, for you and for everyone. In Bethlehem a Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord has just been born.

And the angel tells you to go and look for the child, who you will find wrapped up in cloth and lying in a manger, a feeding trough for animals.

And the sky is suddenly filled with a multitude of angels, praising God and saying:

Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those he favours.

And what do you do? You get up, look at your fellow shepherds and run down to Bethlehem.

You eventually find the new born child. It is exactly as the angel told you. There **is indeed** a new born baby in a manger. The angel was right, the angel knew what it was talking about. You really had seen and heard an angel.

But you now have a job to do. You haven't just run all that way just to look at a baby. You have a message that the angel gave you.

You have been summoned from the fields in order to confirm to Mary and Joseph what they had heard months before. The Angel Gabriel had previously told Mary that she was to have a son who would be holy and would be called the son of God. You need to tell Mary and Joseph that you have heard that the child will be the Messiah.

And so our gospel reading brings the start of a new chapter in the story of God's relationship with his people. The birth of the long-awaited Messiah, the one who it was believed would be David's true heir, who would rescue Israel from its enemies. The one who will be called Jesus, which means salvation.

We see a vulnerable, weak and insignificant baby, born to insignificant parents, witnessed by insignificant shepherds. A baby who will grow into a man who will lead the confrontation between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. A baby who blurs the distinction between the human and the holy.

Of all the accounts of all the different things that happened in the Old and New Testaments, this is the one I would have loved to have been part of. To have been there at the beginning. To have seen that heavenly host. To have returned to the hillside and to the sheep, rejoicing and praising God. An experience that doesn't need theology.

But I wasn't there. None of us were there. What does it take for us to praise God and to rejoice?

Isaiah says, I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being will exult in my God.....the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

All the nations. Let us not forget that the whole world is the House of God. The harsh places, the places with little natural beauty, the places we are frightened to go into as well as those which lift our hearts. All the peoples of the earth belong to God. And so we need to treat this earth and all those who live in it with reverence.

And we can practice reverence. Reverence is a way of praising God. You might like to slow down, take a walk, sit and hold the hand of a loved one, look carefully at a flower. Or you might look at the faces of the strangers you pass in the street. You might like to praise God for them, knowing nothing about them. You might like to praise God that Jesus is their Lord too. Practice too reverence for those who irritate us or cause us to be angry, seeing them too as children of God, remembering that we too will irritate and anger others. May we seek forgiveness for the times when we have done that.

May we be brave, as those shepherds were. For they heard the words, do not be afraid, and they acted as they were instructed. May we learn to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and respond. Seeking to be part of God's kingdom on earth. As this Christmas season continues, may we be full of the joy and expectation that marked that first Christmas.

Amen

Sarah Thomas

31 December 2017

