

CHRISTMAS DAY

I. INTRODUCTION

The angel's message to the unsurprisingly fear filled shepherds was *"fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people."*

'For all the people!'

The events of the first Christmas are for everyone. No one is left out, all are impacted and affected by the coming into the world of Jesus. All are invited to join the shepherds in seeking out the child laid in a manger.

II. FOR ALL THE PEOPLE

Somehow it seems the message that Jesus is for all the people is not always communicated, or heard. Many think that the story and message are not 'Good News' but rather 'bad news'. Some see Christ not as one who brings 'great joy' but as one who is a kill joy. Or perhaps they do not see Christ this way but they do see the church this way. In particular many of the poorest in our land think that Jesus is not really for them.

This is a sadness and a tragedy. In the way the story is told leading up to the angels' announcement of *"good news of a great joy that will be for all the people"*, Luke has been at great pains to stress how the arrival of Jesus is good news for the poor, the down-trodden, the ones society sees as unimportant.

A young girl living in an unimportant town, Nazareth, is chosen by God to be the mother of God's Son. An elderly, childless couple, are chosen to be the parents of one who will go before God's Son.

Mary sings of how God, in choosing her and sending his Son, is turning things upside down

'He has looked on the humble estate of his servant'

'He has scattered the proud'

'He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly'

'He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away'

Luke has made it plain that the political machinations of the great Empire of the day, Rome, leads to the enforced journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Yet he makes it clear that this child is the anointed one, the Lord, the Son of God not Caesar Augustus despite all his claims to those titles.

God chooses to have his son laid in a feeding trough, not a palatial cot. God chooses to announce the arrival of his son to lowly shepherds out in the hills

rather than to the rich and powerful – or even to the local leadership in Bethlehem. He entrusts the spreading of the news of Jesus' birth to this group whose word was not always trusted by their contemporaries, rather than further angelic visitations, or using highly respected local leaders.

Everything in the story shouts 'Good news for all – and especially for the poor'

As Stephen R Holmes has pointed out in his very helpful booklet, 'The Politics of Christmas' both Matthew and Luke's telling of the story are deeply political. This is how he puts it:

"If the telling of the Christmas story – in the classical form of the nativity play, or in the original form (at least of Matthew's narrative) – is to have any place in our celebration of Christmas, it should challenge us in profoundly political ways. The notion that the domestic sphere is apolitical, unchanging, or even worthy of celebration should be challenged by the telling of this story; the story should bring us face-to-face with our views on homelessness, on asylum, on healthcare provision, on intervention in sovereign states whose authorities are repressing their citizens, on our attitude to foreign people resident in our nation, on our beliefs about gender politics. This is not a comfortable fairy story which silently reinforces traditional values, but a disturbing narrative which confronts us with serious questions about our assumptions concerning the way the world is and should be. This story is, or should be, an insistent intervention in our discussions of the common good, calling us to remember the marginalised and forgotten, to be open to the strange of the foreign. With all due respect to Charles Dickens, the last thing the Christmas story invites us to do is to shut our doors and forget about the world outside."

III FOR THE HOMELESS

So the Christmas story does speak to us all about the homeless. Joseph and Mary were temporarily 'homeless' in Bethlehem because of the decision of the Roman powers. In Matthew's account they became homeless refugees in Egypt because of the political decision of Herod the Great. Their housing situation; their enforced moves happened because of the political decisions of the rulers of their day. God enters into this kind of world, and submits himself to experiencing it. So alongside offering care and support to the homeless and the refugee today the coming of Jesus makes us ask questions too of what decisions are being made by people in power that lead to homelessness rising, or to people becoming refugees.

We have seen a growth in the past 12 months of 13% in homelessness. This has not just happened, decisions have been taken nationally and locally which have led to this. Yes let us here in Nottinghamshire support the fantastic work of organisations like Emmanuel House, the Winter Night Shelter, Framework and Arimathea. But let us, alongside them, ask the Lord questions of why this is happening and how decisions could be made to change things.

IV FOR THE FAMILY

Connected with this is the family nature of the Christmas story. Mary was, in our modern terms, a teenage mother whose partner stood by her in difficult circumstances. But they are seen to be part of a wider family network; Elizabeth is a relative. Joseph has to travel to Bethlehem because this is where his family roots lay. Family is seen to be bigger and broader than just parents and child. It is physically dispersed, yet still connected.

It is clear that the role of Mary and Joseph as parents to Jesus is hugely important to how Jesus will be cared for, and raised. Luke makes particular reference to how Jesus grew and developed physically, socially, intellectually and spiritually.

It is not however a story of domestic ease and bliss as the refugee status showed. This story does speak to us about the importance of parental care; it speaks of the value of both a mother and father standing by each other and sharing in the responsibilities of bringing a child into the world and raising the child in a fully rounded way.

But it does not place everything onto the parents. It sets them in a wider and broader family context. It puts them as part of a community and society who share in encouraging the family.

There are Christian family values but they are not as tightly defined and confined as is often portrayed.

The whole story encourages the followers of Jesus to engage in encouraging healthy family life for all, that does not isolate parents as solely responsible but recognises that as many Africans say, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

V. CONCLUSION

Jesus is "*good news of great joy for all the people*" because in his coming God's forgiveness and rescue happens. This is God's way of bringing people back into his family and friendship. It costs Jesus not just to become human but to die painfully on the Cross to bring this about. This is good news for all. It does bring peace with God.

But it is also good news for all because it speaks into our lives and our society about housing and ending homelessness. It speaks to us about understanding why people become refugees. It speaks to us of family, parenting, caring and support.

We have often allowed the Christmas story to become safe; to become nice, a feel good event. When in reality it is very disturbing for it turns our world and our lives upside down making it clear, thankfully, that God is in charge, is active, and loves every one of us deeply. This is why we join with the angels in singing 'Glory to God in the highest'.