

Christmas Online, Dec 2020

Luke 2:1-20,

A Chinese Communist local party boss, was deeply struggling emotionally. He went to an official church to hear the preaching. He heard a sermon about the Angels sang 'Glory' on Christmas Day. He spoke to the elder afterwards. To use his own words.

I said could not see a reason for all the fuss about Jesus. Yes he was a man of morals and who died for them, but that was common in other religions.

The preacher asked: Are you looking for God?

I replied, "I suppose I am". The preacher asked: well if Jesus doesn't seem to be very impressive, what sort of God would you be looking for?

I answered slowly, thinking it through.

'I guess a God who first of all is totally powerful, and then is also totally just or fair.'

The preacher asked again. But how would you know a God like that, was interested in you? I said: Then he would also have to be a God of love.

The elder challenged me by saying. If you find a God who is all three: powerful, just, loving, would you trust him?

'I might, I replied. 'But I would need to find an event that proved he was all three.'

Take this Bible, said the preacher, giving me his very own copy of the Bible. 'And come back to me if you find an event, that shows God is supremely, and uniquely all three.'

I started reading the Bible and pretty soon came across that verse the elder had preached on the morning I attended church. 'Glory to God in the Highest.' What was it that made the angels so excited? After all they had witnessed, what was so unique about the birth of Jesus? I had little time to think on this, as my wife was expecting our first child. All went well with the delivery. And I held the little warm bundle, gazing into his peaceful sleeping face. What perfection the baby seemed. As I looked, the more I was amazed by the sheer miracle of birth. Had I *really* used that word miracle? To describe the birth of my son?

Then I thought, the miracle of the birth of Jesus had to be more than just a miracle of birth to impress those angels so much. I read on and the Spirit of God gave light to my eyes. **God** had become a baby. I looked for the three characteristics of God I would trust.

Power. This has to be a greater act than the creation of the world. In the beginning God was merely bringing a world into being.

Love! God came. If he wasn't interested, He would not have bothered to come at all. After all Jesus had a very hard life, not the kind of life anyone would wish for.

Justice! God loved us so much He came. He came Himself to redeem sinful man and woman. Here was the meaning, the glory of Christianity. All captured in the incarnation.

I wept and wept in my little study. I must have stayed on my knees for hours. When I looked at my watch, and suddenly noticed the date. It was 25th December. Christ's birthday. That Christmas was so real. I saw in the cradle the infinite power, justice and love of God supremely and uniquely illustrated. As love as I live, I will celebrate Christmas every day... ***Glory to God in the Highest for my salvation***
(from Open Doors, 'Daily Inspiration from the Lion's Den, Devotional, entry for 25th December).

The great events of Christmas, begin with **Power**. In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree. Power is expressed – everyone must return to his home town. Only men needed travel for this census which assessed the number of people who could be taxed.. He expresses his power and Joseph travels with his heavily pregnant wife...

He expressed his power and yet behind the scenes one much greater is expressing his power. The Creator God. The decree was the mechanism the Lord God uses to fulfil the prophecy in Micah that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem for Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth 120 kilometres away. And so the Lord moves the hand of Caesar Augustus.

Joseph and Mary. We don't know what they thought of all this. Luke doesn't record anything. In 7 packed verses, he describes the political situation of the time and how it all changed; the journey south to Bethlehem, the time came for the baby to be born; and he was placed in a manger – an animal feeding trough – because there was no guest room – the likely correct translation of that word sung as 'inn'.

What Joseph and Mary faced was. A government placed restrictions on their movements. In face they were told, by the highest authority, go to your home and stay there. Can you imagine the disruption and possible stress? They had the plans for who would help Mary with the birth, who would be with Joseph outside, who would be there for the circumcision, that great moment of joining God's people, of how they would celebrate as a large group, in the village. All gone. All changed. Government restrictions. Go to your home and stay there. Disruption, change to precious plans, family celebrations cancelled, that perhaps had been looked forward to for months. I don't need to say we may feel a bit similar...

We know why Jesus was born in Bethelhem. God used the decree of a pagan emperor. For Joseph and Mary, with the changes, the govt demands, the restrictions, the last minute need to travel, God

remained sovereign. In fact. God was working out his plans. It reminds me of the song Waymaker, 'even when we don't see it you are working'. So to place their experiences against our own. What is God doing in us, around us, through us? I mean when Paul wrote so confidently, 'he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.' He will carry it on, even in Corona time... 'Even when we don't see it, you are working.'

People may see the world, and nations out of control, with the eyes of faith we believe despite all that has happened in this hard year across the globe and what will happen in 2020, God remains in charge and is working things out accordance to his will... Glory to God in the Highest. ***His will is done.***

Revealed. The angel reveals what has happened. The shepherds are told –Today in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find him a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. They are not commanded to go, they are told and ***invited*** to go and see.

Consider who this incredible announcement is made to – not to palace officials, Roman Governors, to high ranking member of the Jewish religious establishment but to Shepherds. Shepherds were near the bottom of the social scale in their society. Not only were they poor but in some rabbi writings they were seen as unclean. They just couldn't keep up with the ceremonial rules of washing due to their work.

So, when the invitation is made, how could they know they would be welcome. But the phrase – you will find him a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger. ***A manger.*** Jewish peasant homes did not have a room separate from the house for the animals but the space for the animals was usually attached to the house – a manger, the Messiah born in a house like their own, The Christ Child was not born in a mansion or wealthy merchant's guest room, but in a home like theirs. Good news. A sign for the lowly shepherds. A sign that they – poor,

unclean in eyes of some, poorly educated, and yet invited, the first to receive not just the birth announcement card but an invitation card to come and see the new born Messiah. The Christ Child who comes for the rich and influential, the poor and needy. The unclean were judged to be clean – to visit the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The outcasts became honoured guests.

Revealed, is the heart of God for all. Glory to God in the Highest. ***For all he came.***

Displayed. The sky then is filled – “a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to all on whom his favour rests.” You know this is the only time, we see angels openly praising God with the human eye. There are plenty of visions where we see this happen – in Isaiah, in Revelation of course – and we are told by Jesus of angels rejoicing when a sinner repents. Yet, this is not vision, the messenger is there and he is joined. A great company joined him. Was the sky filled? The noise great! And how appropriate, perhaps the only time, the angelic host appear, in human view, is to praise and celebrate the incarnation – God’s justice, power, love proclaimed! The birth of the Saviour and King. It is worth simply pausing.

The only time in human history this has happened and the next time, will be when the Lord returns. What does that say about how special, important this night is?

This focus can be a strength. I mentioned the Book of Revelation where there are significant moments through in the visions recorded when glory is given to God. It was a letter written to Christians – persecuted, pressured for their faith. They know pain, isolation, suffering. Yet they are reminded God remains in control. And how God can be glorified for his creation, for who he is, and for the Lamb can be praised for how he slain for all –the child in the manger who would die to bring peace for all. Rev 5 ends with ‘I heard every

creature in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing 'to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, be praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever!' In their difficulties and suffering.

Yet. In hard times. ***Glory to God in the Highest.***

Response. The angels leave. The shepherds have a choice. They say 'let us go...' it says they hurried ... and they went, they saw, they spread the word and they praised and glorified God. When the angel speaks before, to Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph, it is information, sharing what will happen. Here the angel has invited them and they have responded and came and see. And their response is to share with others.

So, as we celebrate this event, we are mindful. Who would value / needs the good news that the angels shared? Are there others we can invite to 'come and see'. Maybe Alpha is something – a way to come and see, the power, love and justice of God revealed.

The shepherds are the first to greet the new born King, and they are the first messengers of the good news of his birth.

To be like them, but not only like them in talking about faith, but also in praise – they copy the angels, as they glorified God, the shepherds return to their day to day activities and homes, praising and glorifying God.

Caesar Augustus ruled over a vast empire. Augustus claimed to be the son of a god. He was worshipped and hailed as the bringing of peace to the empire. Augustus had first borrowed the word for Gospel or Good news and applied it as a label for

the new world order represented by his reign. But while he was hailed and flattered, the angels declared what was truly good news, how would peace truly come to all ages and all sorts. They announced **God's response** to the world and its needs. It is still his response today. It was through the Son of God, Saviour, Messiah and bringer of peace being born in poverty in a simple home that was not his own.

The Lord God had come, to restore good relations between God and sinful people, and to bring all the blessings of salvation for those who believe in him.

To finish.

“You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

A Saviour has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1 & 14)…”

Glory to God in the Highest.

The Creed.