

St Marc, Grenoble
Sunday 26th December 2021 (1st After Christmas)
Titus 3: 4 - 7
Luke 2: 1 - 20
'Peace on Earth'

Good morning and welcome! A special welcome to those joining us on Zoom
Let's Pray

I'm so pleased you've joined us this morning. Christmas Day is over. We can relax, settle down and make yourselves comfortable!

This sermon has endless possibilities - could go on for hours - but some people have said they have lunch dates, so I'd better not go on too long.

I'd like to ask you a couple of quick questions, your thoughts on Christmas - I hope some of you will share. There are NO wrong answers:

First, what was the best bit of Christmas for you?? What gave you the greatest joy??

Second, Why did you come to church today?? And, what are you looking forward to in the year ahead?? ...

OK, now, I'd like to take a few moments to look back to the first Christmas and three little word pictures

Let's think about Mary:

A young girl, maybe as young as 13 or 14, startled, or perhaps terrified by an angel; telling her she has found favour with God and that she is going to be the mother of the Messiah. (Every Judean mother's dream).

She's going to become pregnant – an offence out of wedlock, which in those times, could have had her stoned to death. Leave alone the real possibility, not surprisingly, of her fiancé, unceremoniously dumping her ... but, after her initial puzzled question – 'How will this happen? I'm still a virgin? And the angel's response: 'With God, nothing is impossible' She responded 'OK – I'm the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said'

Then we're told, in her excitement, she rushed off to see her cousin Elizabeth – who, she discovered, also had a remarkable 'God' experience with pregnancy ... in her older years

But, it's Mary's song (What we now know as the Magnificat) I'd like to focus on: 'My soul declares that the Lord is great, my spirit exults in my saviour, my God! ... The powerful one, whose name is Holy, has done great things for me!' Her joy, in that song, is palpable; you can almost touch it.

God filled Joy pours from her! Her life is dramatically, irreversibly changed! There are many painful experiences to come in her life – but she seems able to face even those hard situations in a 'God with her' sense of love and joy.

For our second Cameo, let's think about the shepherds; I wonder what our response would have been if we'd been with them on the hillside, outside Bethlehem, that first Christmas night, for the angelic announcement?

No doubt at first they too were terrified; then, almost immediately, 'amazed' by the news of the birth of the long-awaited Messiah, something the people of Judah had been waiting hundreds of years for. They longed for Messiah – a saviour, who they thought would come and restore the sovereignty of their nation and kick out the occupying Romans.

As soon as the angelic choirs left, the first response of the shepherds was to go and see this saviour for themselves; 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us' And, off they hurried!

They knew what they were looking for – the angels had told them how to identify their saviour: He'd be wrapped in bands of cloth and His cradle would be an animals' feeding trough!

Off they went, 'with haste and excitement' and found Mary, Joseph and the child, lying in a manger! Their information confirmed, it wasn't an idle dream!

They worshipped Him and then we're told they shared – presumably with anyone who'd listen to their fantastic story – what they'd been told about this child. They couldn't keep the Joy of this wonderful news to themselves and we're told 'All who heard it were amazed'!

The shepherds returned to their fields, 'glorifying and praising God'; the lives of these ritually unclean outcasts, who lived on the fringes of religious society – tolerated because they provided the lambs for sacrifice, were changed for ever by their face to face encounter with Jesus and the Joy he brought!

We're told 'Mary treasured all these words and kept them in her heart.'

My third cameo comes from St Matthew's Gospel, a far less attractive, less commonly shared, post Christmas story ...

'After the Magi had gone, suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said, and take the child and his mother, and hurry off to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you. [Because] Herod is going to hunt for the child to kill him.'

And we know that Herod had all the boy children, of a similar age – up to two years, in that area, violently killed – in a desperate, selfish attempt to preserve his own position; with no compassion at all for the bereft mothers.

Not much Joy in that story, is there? But, for me, there's real sense of empathy in that Jesus, the Messiah, the saviour of the world, along with his earthly family, experienced the hatred and the stark reality – so common for many thousands, even millions, of people right now, in this 21st C – of becoming a homeless, stateless refugee.

Jesus showed and shared his empathy for those experiencing that trauma, even now. There are currently so many parallels in many different places.

It doesn't bring joy; but an awareness of God's understanding, care and love, for people in that situation. What response does it generate in us?

There's no doubt Jesus' birth, in unlikely circumstances, had a great impact on many. The King of the world was born on earth, not into a royal palace, but into poverty and oppression.

The circumstances of His birth established His credentials to identify with and care for everyone who is, in any way, oppressed or rejected; Jesus offers the care, the power, the joy and the light of His love to everyone. Throughout His life on earth He experienced what it was like to live in the harsh, real world, and He continues to reach out to many people who are otherwise marginalised, bereft or needy.

As Christians, if we want to serve our loving saviour, we're called to respond like the shepherds; to accept the warmth and light of His love into our lives; and to share it with others. There is a real need for it ... let me share a true story with you

A couple of years ago, Julia and I were in London visiting friends who are clergy in one of the richest parishes in the country, which also has Victoria Station in the parish.

We were invited to join a Christmas outreach on the station... Supported by a carol singing choir of multi racial primary children, from the Church school, our job was to offer mince pies to anyone who'd take one.

Picture the scene ... a crowded station, people rushing to, and from, trains –

on their way home from Christmas shopping, Office Parties or, simply, 'Work' had their single minded urgency interrupted! Their disbelief was poignant!

The most common question was: 'What are you collecting for? Where's the bucket?' Our answer was: "We're not, and there isn't one ... we just want to wish you a very Happy Christmas!"

The response was simply amazing, we gave away the first 360 mince pies and had to send for more – we gave out over 500 in total!

But the reaction of one middle aged lady I met made the biggest impact on me ... "Would you like a mince pie?" "No thanks, I couldn't, but what are you collecting for?" - "We're not, we simply want to wish you a very happy Christmas"

At that, her eyes filled up and she burst into tears ... I said "Oh dear, what's the matter??" "Nothing," she sobbed, "I simply cannot believe that people would do that any more ... thank you" And, with that, she rushed off ...

I spent a long time reflecting on that brief meeting; and my conclusion is that there are thousands of people, rushing about, 'out there', who simply do not know about the love of Jesus and what it could mean in their lives.

This Christmas, and in the coming year, I think we're called to reach out and share that love with everyone we meet because it could totally change lives.

Happy Christmas and New Year!!