

Luke 2: 8-20 The Angels, the Shepherds and Jesus.

Intro Guess the presents!

If we try to work out what something is, or who someone is, then asking questions is a great thing to do. And there are a whole bunch of questions that we can ask about our reading this morning. Because this morning we are thinking about the shepherds and the Angels, or more specifically, the message the Angels gave to the shepherds and what it all means to us. And as we listen to the reading now, I want you to listen out for answers to these five questions: when, where, what, who, and why. Answers to all those five questions are in this passage.

Reading Luke chapter 2 verses 8 to 20

So, have you found answers to those five questions? Let's see shall we.

An easy one to start with: **when**? The Angels gave a message of good news to the shepherds, but when did that good news come about? If you've got your Bible open you can see the answer in verse 11. It's today! The Angels appeared with good news that something amazing was happening today!

Now of course, the 'today' in the passage refers to a day some 2000 or so years ago- the first Christmas Day. The Angels appeared to the shepherds because something astonishing had happened on that specific day in history. We talked about that on Christmas Day, didn't we? This is a real historical event! First one mighty angel, and then a whole host of angels, appeared to some shepherds on that first Christmas Day.

But that doesn't mean that this has nothing to do with us. As we'll see as we go through this passage, this wasn't just good news for them on that very first Christmas, but it remains good news for us!

What about the second question? **Where**? Where did this all take place? Well, when we looked at verses 1 to 7 on Christmas Day, we saw that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. And it was nearby that the shepherds were living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks at night. And of course, if we know our Old Testament history, Bethlehem, even though it was a small town, was highly significant. It was the town in which David lived before he became King. Bethlehem was a small town, with a royal heritage. And of course, the prophet Micah, speaking some 600 years before, had prophesied that Bethlehem would also have a future role in the salvation of God's people.

So, we know when, and we know where, but **what** was the message the angels brought? For a start verse 10 tells us that it was '*good news of great joy for all the people.*' Over the Christmas period we tend to hear a bit more about good news than we do normally, so perhaps the news directors realise that Christmas really is good news and they want to join in! But the news the angels brought wasn't about a wonderful act of kindness, the news the angels brought was that a Saviour had been born.

In the footnote of your Bible, you'll see that the title this saviour is given – the Christ- can mean Messiah or anointed one. Throughout Israel's history they had had anointed Kings and leaders, chosen by God, to bring about rescue and freedom and restoration. But this wasn't just continuation of that line of messiahs, just another one of in a long line of flawed men who brought some relief but who ultimately failed in their mission. This was the long-awaited Messiah: the one that Isaiah had spoken of, the one that David had spoken of, the one that Moses had pointed people towards, the one that many of the others prophets had pointed people to. Why was this Messiah different? For that, we need to answer the question who?

Who was he? The end of verse 11 gives the answer: He is Christ the Lord. Just as the prophet Micah had alluded to, this saviour was God himself. In the person of Jesus Christ, God himself came to earth. There were no angelic choirs singing at the birth of Moses or David or Solomon or Elijah. The angels only sang for the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. He is the one who is worthy of all the glory in the highest! He's the one who created the heavens and the earth and all that was in them; He's the one who holds the stars in space; gives us every breath we take; who, with the father and the spirit has eternally existed in the glory of the Trinity; he is the one who has come! No wonder the skies were filled with angels praising God!

No wonder too, that the shepherds headed off into town to see this thing that has happened. And **where** do they go? Well they go to Bethlehem, we know that, but they are looking for something specific. They have been told that the child they are looking for will be wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. That's the sign! I've never been on a blind date, but in the movies, there's often a single red rose on a table where one of the couple is sitting and waiting, so the other knows at which where to stop. But there's no red rose here – just a manger.

As I've been mulling that fact over this week it's struck me just how wonderful that simple detail really is. For a start, what a way to make sure that the shepherds felt right at home! Having been told that the Saviour had been born in Bethlehem, they would surely have expected him to be in the smartest, richest, most glamorous house where their attempts to get in and see him might have been rebuffed. But no, Jesus was born in an ordinary house, a humble abode, surrounded by ordinary people, and where being wrapped up in cloths and laid in a bed of hay would have been absolutely normal, so normal, that the shepherds would have felt right at home. And secondly, where better for the saviour of the world to be placed than in a feeding trough? After all Jesus is our true bread, the bread of life, the one on whom we feed in our hearts by faith as we share bread and wine together in communion What a glorious thought!

Of course, the one question we are left with, **why Jesus came**, isn't answered in this passage is it? For the answer to that, we need to read through the birth narratives again. When the angel spoke to Mary in Luke 1 she was told that her child would have an eternal kingdom. In Matthew chapter 2 verse 21, Joseph is told that they are to call the child Jesus because "*he will save the people from their sins.*" That's something that Zechariah sings about at the end of Luke chapter 1. It's a song about salvation and rescue and redemption because Jesus will rescue us from the hand of our greatest enemy, enabling us to serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness all our days, and to make a way for sins to be forgiven.

How that will happen only becomes clear as we go through the gospel accounts, but we know the end of that story already don't we! In the weeks leading up to Christmas we looked at those for gospel outlines and all of them talked about the problem of sin, our alienation from God, the fact that we are facing God's righteous and eternal judgement and that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. And it's not just that the remedy is slightly out of our reach, and if only we can do slightly better try a little harder then perhaps we can do it. No! We are all utterly lost; utterly sinful; utterly deserving of God's judgement and utterly helpless. And yet God in his glorious love and amazing grace came to earth that first Christmas to be the remedy for our sin. And as the Christmas story shows, this remedy is just as available to humble shepherds, ordinary men and women no matter how lowly or uneducated, as it is too great and the good, the wise and the rich, whether they be stargazers from the East or British royalty or American multimillionaires. This that's what the angels sang wasn't it! Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men on whom his favour rests!

So perhaps that begs another question – **who** are those people on whom God's favour rests? Is this good news for everyone? Does it imply that there are some people on whom his favour does not rest?

Well as Jesus begins his preaching ministry, it's clear that although the gospel is available to all, (*it is after all a message of good news of great joy for all people!*) not everyone receives its benefits. Salvation is available to all, but not everyone believes it or wants it or accepts it! I'm sure you know many people who are just simply not interested in Jesus. They think Jesus has nothing to offer them that they either need or desire, so whilst the gospel is good news for them, they won't share in its benefits because they have turned away. Perhaps you know people who are following other faiths. They know they have a problem, but think that they have found a better solution. The gospel is good news for them too, because no one is excluded from God's invitation, but they won't share in its benefits because they have rejected Jesus.

This is where the example of the shepherds is such a helpful model for us. They hear the good news and they come and see for themselves. Perhaps you are desperate for some of your friends and family to respond like that, perhaps that's how you are responding right now. Once we hear the good news the first step is to come and see: does it make sense; does it add up? Is it true? Can Jesus really deliver?

The shepherds came and saw and believed. That's the next step isn't it. Asking questions, wrestling with the Bible's teaching, weighing it all up is right and proper, but at some point you need to make a stand and say 'this is what I believe!' The shepherds did that. All that the shepherds had been told by the angels was exactly what they saw in Bethlehem. They heard, they checked it out and they believed. And how do we know that? Well, because their lives changed. They went away glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen, and they spread the word concerning the child. They couldn't stop talking about Jesus. They had been changed forever.

I doubt if there is anyone here today who doesn't understand what happened at that first Christmas or why Jesus came: so my question to you this morning is to ask how deeply that truth has sunk down into your heart. How much has the gospel changed you?

The start of a new year is often a time when we take a good look at ourselves but so often we keep that to our physical bodies and make resolutions to do more exercise, eat more healthily, perhaps lose a little weight. But I wonder if actually our hearts and our souls and our spirits that are rather flabby and out of shape right now? Has the good news of Christmas become stale to you? Have you, over the last year, grown in your knowledge and understanding of Jesus and his kingdom or have you stood still? Have you, over the last year, grown in likeness to Jesus as his Spirit has worked in you or are you the same or perhaps even more worldly than a year ago? Has the good news of Jesus been frequently on your lips?

When you look at your spiritual life, if you are not the person you know you want to be, why not make your New Year's resolution something to do with the shape and health of your soul? Read the scriptures more, meditate more on the scriptures more, pray more, train yourself to speak up for Jesus more. Let the gospel have the same impact on your soul as it had on those shepherds because this is good news for you too. And if you have heard and believed the Gospel then God's eternal favour, his unending love, his unshakeable grace, his glorious and certain promises rest on you too. And that, as the shepherds found, is reason to rejoice.