

Shepherds, angels and parents

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[0 : 00] Well that story was so clearly read by the boys and girls. We're going to look at it again. So if you have a Bible that you can follow in, it is Luke chapter 2.

That's the bit in the Bible where we have the shepherds and the angels. And we're going to look at it and look at this story of the birth of Jesus and have a little think about what sort of story it is.

So I think it would be respectful to pray before we come to holy things. So I invite you to pray and we will pray.

Lord, we have come to think about these events which in some ways are so familiar and yet in other ways we find quite difficult to grapple with because of all the things that surround them in our culture.

So we pray for the work of the Holy Spirit to enable us to hear your word and to respond to it as we should.

[1 : 09] And we pray that it will be spoken as it should as well. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Our world is made up of stories.

We've just recently had the story of Nelson Mandela, the leader in South Africa. And you think of the story that's told us of the events of his life which demonstrate, I think, rather an admirable man, it seems to me, a man who somehow knew a way of forgiving his enemies and showed a way of reconciliation and forgiveness and statesmanship.

There's another story been in the news recently. I don't know whether you've caught that one of the North Korean leader who had caused to be arrested, tried and executed, his uncle who'd mentored him.

And I think he was executed for treachery. It's a very bizarre story, it seems to me. I can't really understand that. Rather sinister. Well, there are nice stories and there are nasty stories and there are true stories and there are unreliable stories.

And which of those, if any, is the story of the birth of Jesus. I thought we could look at that by looking at the main characters and seeing what we could work out about them.

[2 : 36] And I think as we have had it read to us, the main characters are the shepherds in order of appearance, cast in order of appearance. There's the shepherds, the angel and the angels, the baby and the parents.

So I thought we could look at those together for a little while. So first of all, let's look at the shepherds. If you're used to coming here, you'll know I do these wonderful pieces of fine art. So there's the shepherds. And I thought, how could we characterize the shepherds? What are they like? We're not told anything about them by way of introduction.

There's no particular lead up to them. And I don't think we ever hear about them in the narrative afterwards, apart from what Mark read to us. So I thought that's the best word that I could think of for them.

Anybody like to suggest what word I was thinking of? Because they're not superheroes. Ordinary. Yes, they're not famous, apart from this.

[3 : 51] I think they're there because they're ordinary. They're not famous. They're not strong. They're not talented. So if you Googled their names, you would find you only get somebody who actually lives in Australia.

Do you know what I mean? They're not famous people. They're ordinary people. If you like, they're ordinary people in a dark place. I don't know whether that is really significant, but you could imagine them there keeping watch over their flocks by night.

It would be dark, perhaps a little bit scary. But ordinary people, you might say, in a dark place. I find it rather interesting that God includes, in his purposes, ordinary people.

It's not just the rich and famous that are in this story. It's just ordinary people going about their ordinary business. We'll come back to the shepherds in a moment because they reappear. There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. Come back to the shepherds. Next bit of the story says, An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

[5 : 14] But the angel said to them, there's a singular angel at this point, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

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 a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Suddenly 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 men on whom his favour rests.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another whatever they said. So let's think about the angels. I don't know how to draw an angel, so that's a guess.

Angels in the Bible quite often appear in a human form, but they seem to be able to fly or something like that. So that's a guess really.

[6 : 19] One day we'll find out, but at the moment it's a guess. And by contrast with the shepherds, the angels who play this part in the story now, any suggestions for the extraordinary?

By which I don't mean they're more ordinary than the angels. I mean they're the opposite of ordinary. They're extraordinary. They're extraordinary.

And they are. You're reading through shepherds, yeah, we know about that, and then suddenly angels. Absolutely extraordinary. So I suppose you could stop at that point and say I'm not going to believe it now because it's extraordinary.

Though I have to say, extraordinary things do happen, don't they? Not everything that happens is ordinary and predictable. That's not the way life is, is it? Well, the record of the angels here is that they're extraordinary.

And it says, an angel of the Lord appeared to them. So I've had a little think about their method of travel. Anybody like to suggest because it's not normal travel.

[7 : 41] Any suggestions? This word here? That word space, yes. Now, as it's recorded here, and you notice how they come into this scene and how they leave the scene, what's the word something space?

They travel across space? They don't travel across space, do they? Because you don't have any sense of them appearing in the distance and getting closer and closer and closer. And you don't get a sense of them disappearing into the distance.

It says, they appeared, and then they disappeared. Well, I put into. I was thinking into space. The idea of beings, if you like, from another dimension, who can appear in our dimension sort of at will, they can travel into space.

They're not limited by space, and they don't travel through space. They travel into space. I think that's a fair description. I couldn't really explain much more about it, but that's what seems to be described here.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them. And at the end, the angels left them and went into heaven. So they went out of space, we presume, into heaven.

[8 : 59] Well, their mode of transport isn't the main thing. The angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. That's to say, around the shepherds. I'm going to put something here.

Any suggestions? Any suggestions? Glory of God. Yes, they bring the glory of God. And the glory of God doesn't seem to be a philosophical idea, but something visible.

The glory of the Lord shone around them. So not only do the angels have sort of warp engines to enter our space, but they seem to bring with them, it's not a completely close connection, but it does seem to be a connection.

They bring with them something of the brightness from the world which they've just left. They bring the glory of God. Now, angels in the Bible are attendants of the Almighty, and they seem to have something of his style and grandeur.

So I've never met David Cameron. Has anybody here met David Cameron? No. No is the answer. I assume that he is surrounded by aides and PAs and principal private secretaries and things like that.

[10:20] And I would rather assume that his principal private secretary dresses pretty similar with a fairly expensive suit and a nice tie.

And I would imagine that when David Cameron goes somewhere in his Bleak Black Blee MW or whatever he travels in, that these aides and principal private secretaries go along also in suits and, you know, they all know which knife and fork to use and those sorts of things.

They're all at home in the same high-flying world of Westminster. And it seems like this with the angels. They are not God himself, but they seem at home in the glorious atmosphere atmosphere of heaven.

And when they come somewhere, they bring some of that glory with them. They bring, they have something of the throne about them. And I find that a rather, rather amazing ingredient in the story. The angel of the Lord appeared to them. The glory of the Lord shone around them. And then my next word about these characters. Any suggestions? Fearsome.

[11:40] The trouble with a nativity play is that you can't really have anything scary in it because it would put off the children. But it is, the real life thing, according to this, was scary.

It says they were mega fearful. They're grown men. They're used to being out in the countryside at night.

They're not just frightened of every shadow and every branch moving. But these guys are absolutely terrified when the angels appear, well, when the angel appears and when the glory of the Lord shines about them.

Apparently, fear is not the desired reaction, but it is certainly the first reaction. They are like the one in whose presence they live. He is almighty, not to be messed about with, not to be made comical, not trivial, and the glory of the Lord emphasizes that and their first reply is, this is terrifying.

I think there's something there for us to understand about about this story. But not only are they extraordinary and traveling into space and bringing the glory of God and being rather fearsome, but angel is the same word as actually messenger, both in Hebrew and in Greek.

[13:11] So, this is their mission. They haven't come to terrify it. They've come to do this. Any suggestions? News bringers.

I suppose they didn't have Twitter in those days, did they? They didn't have the internet. internet. So, here is a special announcement made by top people.

And the angels bring this, or the angel, singular, brings this news. Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people. We'll look at that in a moment.

Now, I'm going to include the extra number of angels that appear. Verse 13, suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, so I've put there, any suggestions for this word about the angels?

Something, something, T-H-U, something, I, something, something, T, and I've missed one thing. I think I've missed something off, haven't I?

[14:23] I was thinking enthusiastic. enthusiastic. So I have missed something, enthusiastic. I think they are enthusiastic because he says, I bring you good news of great joy.

I bring you good news of great joy. I don't do this every day, says the angel. You won't find me here tomorrow. This is very special. I bring you good news of great joy.

Something very special has happened. And then you get this sudden appearance of the great company. It's like a big army of angels, a great company of the heavenly host, praising God.

So let's imagine the crowd at a cup final. Let's imagine the crowd at the London Olympics. let's imagine them all standing up and all shouting out together.

Glory to God in the highest. On earth peace to men on whom his favour rests. Can you get the feel of how dramatic that would be?

[15:41] Can I say they don't sing? It says say, they're saying, because in the Bible angels don't sing. It's only us who can sing. Angels have to say stuff.

And they're saying this, I mean, how would they say it? All in unison? Like an army? You know, those medieval armies who would bang their spears and shout out abuse at the enemy or something like that?

Is this how they're saying? Glory to God in the highest or something like that. But it's strong stuff. And they, I put enthusiasm, that's probably a mild word for what we're meant to understand about this address.

And I've put one more thing about the angels. I just put an N and a V. Envious.

Envious. I put a question mark there because the text doesn't tell us they're envious. but there are other suggestions that they might be envious in this way.

[16:53] He's telling of God becoming human, of God becoming man. The angels have no such event in their history.

The Bible does say this. God has never and will never and does not intend ever to take upon himself the nature of angels to redeem them.

It's only humankind that God has done this for. We're told that the angels stood on tiptoe wondering how the plan of the Bible would unfold.

They longed to look into these things. So I wonder if at this point they were a bit envious. It's a thought, isn't it? The upshot of it is what a privilege it is to be human.

When God came to earth, he did not become a kitten, he did not become a koala bear, he has said as a matter of policy he does not intend to become an angel.

[18:00] He became human. Our race is greatly privileged. That's what it says. Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace to humankind on whom his favour rests.

We are favoured above all the species and creations in the whole universe because God became one of us. Pretty amazing. So there's the angels.

Let's look at the third player, although the player doesn't do very much at this point, which is the baby. I'm not particularly good at drawing babies, I'm afraid.

Those look a little bit like slugs. So let's have a think about the baby.

So my first word here, now this one needs a little bit of thinking about. Do you remember that there was no room for them in the guest room?

[19:12] There was no room for this family. There was no maternity unit. There was no special provision. There was no gas and air. There was no room for them.

And they're here not because they've chosen to be, but because Caesar Augustus way over there in Rome issued a decree. I want everybody counted. Send them all to their ancestral homes.

Really? It's not a good time. You get there. So that's the sort of situation. Any suggestions? And the baby is put in a manger.

So this is actually our rack for putting radio times in. But it's got a doll in it today. A manger, a feeding trough.

So any suggestions to this first word for the baby? An outsider. An outsider. It's the story of all sorts of mixtures.

[20:11] The baby is an outsider. He comes into the world as an outsider. He doesn't come into the warm embrace of our world, you know, sit here at some really posh place and be surrounded by all sorts of luxuries.

He comes in sort of on the margins. He's an outsider. There was this census that pushed him around. There was no room and there he is in a manger. But we could also say that he's this.

To you is born, this is the place of his birth, in the town of David. Today in the town of David.

Interesting that God has so arranged it that this Roman emperor who thought he had the good idea for this census, this Roman emperor has inadvertently arranged that Jesus should be born in exactly the place that he was meant to be born.

And it is to do with this word, with a K. Kingly. Kingly. Royal, in other words. Once in royal David's city.

There's something royalty about it. You might say it's royalty down on its luck. Because here's royalty that doesn't have a proper room to stay in. Here's royalty that doesn't have a proper postnatal care.

[21:39] Here's royalty not in Harley Street, but in a stable. And there's actually quite a bit said about the baby, which we don't get, doesn't get teased out until much later.

Today in the town of David, David, this word, a saviour. The word saviour is fairly crucial.

It implies that there are people who are in a right pickle, who are oppressed, who are suffering, who are in trouble. Maybe they don't even realise it.

But they can't save themselves, and somebody needs to come and do it for them. And it may be that they waited a long, long time for this to happen. And the angel said, here, now, at last, in the city of David, a saviour has been born.

He's only a baby at the moment, but that's what he is. He's a saviour. And it goes further than that, and I've missed one out as well. This one? C, something, R, something, something, something.

[22 : 52] Something. Christ. He is Christ the Lord.

So, not any old saviour, but a particular saviour, in a particular plan, with a particular job description, that Christ is the Jewish Messiah, and that's who he is.

And I missed one out. So, I should put this one, beginning with L, which is what he says next. He is Christ the Lord. So, he puts together a whole string of titles, which get unpacked later on, as Luke tells his story at length.

But here we see the baby, who is an outsider, who is kingly, who is a saviour, who is particularly a Jewish saviour. He is the Christ. And we're told he is the Lord.

He's the big boss. It's a fairly subversive claim, because we thought Caesar was Lord. After all, it's Caesar who issued the decree, and the whole Roman world all have to get up and go on the coaches and buses and trains all over the place for this census.

[24 : 12] And it's an article of faith, politically. Caesar is Lord. But the angel says, no, he isn't. This baby is Lord. He is Christ the Lord.

He's Lord of Caesar. He's the Lord of David Cameron. He's the Lord of Jason Kit Kat. He's the Lord of North Korea and South Korea. He's actually the Lord of you and me.

But anyway, there's the baby. Let's look at the parents. And what it says basically about the parents is I've missed a bit out, haven't I?

I should have come back to the shepherds. So as we read it through, the angel says, glory to God in the highest, peace on earth to men on whom his favour rests.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let us go into Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about. So we just need to complete the bit about the shepherds if I can find it.

[25 : 25] Let's go back to the shepherds before we get to the parents. So they were ordinary and now they've heard the angels, they are these things because they say let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about.

Responsive, responsive, responsive. Responsive. Yeah, they're told here's something going to happen or something has happened and they say okay we'll go and see that.

The angels said you will find a baby wrapped in cloth, this will be a sign to you. And I suppose they could have said I don't believe in that sort of stuff. Or they could have said nah mistaken identity. But they said no we'll go and see. So they responded. It's interesting this is the way the Bible works. It invites response. It's not simply a book of information but even as you're listening it is inviting you to a response.

You might respond by saying well it is a load of old rubbish or you might respond by saying I've heard it all before. Or you might respond by saying actually now I come to think of it this does need me to get involved with it.

[26 : 45] They were responsive. And this is actually the role they play. Two words something, why, something and then another word beginning with W.

I witnesses. This is very very Luke. He is very keen. Luke is the writer of this gospel. He's very keen on his readers knowing I haven't made this up.

People saw this. There are eyewitnesses. He actually begins his document by saying many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us just as they were handed down to us by those who were first, from the first, were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

It's different from a fairy story you see. Nobody actually was there for a fairy story but Luke says I really don't want you to put what I'm writing under the heading fairy story.

What I'm writing I've researched, put it under the heading history please. History, reportage, documentation, that's what it is. And here are the shepherds who exactly fit into that role.

[27 : 52] We'll go and see. We'll go and check. And of course it says they found it exactly as he said and then they went and told other people.

So we've closed the loop on the shepherds but we didn't quite finish with the parents. And all we're told here about the parents is, all we're told is but Mary treasured up all these things.

People were amazed. What's going on here? Mary treasured up all these things. Do you know this word that's coming before I read it? Pondered.

Not a bad thing to do. To ponder. Now you are all very sophisticated people and you don't want to just take in any nonsense that people say to you just because it's Christmas.

you're not gullible. But if you want to be honest, you did ought to ponder, to think it through and particularly before you make up your mind you're not going to take it any further.

[29 : 09] Make sure you pondered it. Make sure you pondered it. So there's the fourth thing of the parents.

So I'll come back to my original question. So what sort of a story is it? We've looked at the shepherds and the angels and the baby and the parents. So what sort of a story is it? Well I'm going to say first of all it's a true story.

We use the word story to mean made up story but not always don't always mean made up story. I want to put in the claim this is a true story. It's a piece of history.

extraordinary but then sometimes real life is extraordinary. Luke would certainly insist that you were told it was true because he has said as I read earlier I have investigated everything carefully from the beginning he says and I'm writing this that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Please don't think that because Luke wrote a long time ago he was stupid. He wasn't stupid. He was intelligent as you or I and he wrote it down and he said I've checked this and it's true.

[30 : 35] So I've put in that number one it's a true story. Number two it's a wholesome story. There are ugly stories. There are disappointing stories.

There are sad stories. This is a wholesome story. It's the sort of story that if it weren't true all good people would wish that it was true.

It's not a story of corruption. It's not a story with a sad ending. It's not a story that when you read it it disappoints you. It's not a story of oppression. It's a story of weakness.

It's a story about a purpose achieved through lowliness. It's a story about extraordinary things being done via ordinary people.

It's a story of forgiveness if one may say so even more than Nelson Mandela because this person lays down his life for his enemies in the end.

[31 : 38] It's a story about self-sacrifice. It's a story about love. love. It's a story with an absolutely wonderful happy ending. It's the only story in the world where you can actually say and they all lived happily ever after.

It is a wholesome story. A story that we should be glad to be able to retell. it's an engaging story. I don't mean by that I don't mean it just is interesting and captivates our imagination although hopefully it does even though we've heard it so many times before.

But in fact it's engaging in the sense that we're part of it. Did you notice that? It includes us. You could almost write your name in there as being part of this story.

Did you notice that the angel said I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people? I think that includes you and me because we're people aren't we?

You might say well no he meant particularly the Jewish people and say okay okay. I really don't think it's limited to the Jewish people but that's maybe what he said it's good news for your people Israel.

[32 : 57] Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you says the angel and you might say well no no no no that's just the angel talking to the shepherds it was good news for them you see okay.

Well what about this the last quote from the angels glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to humankind on whom his favour rests.

That's us isn't it? That's absolutely universal. How what an enviable position you humans are in says the angel.

What an enviable position you humans are in because God has set his favour on you lot God has something in store for you lot God has an invitation for you God has a salvation for you God has a purpose for you God has a happy ending for you do you see it engages us in the story because we're in there literally anybody here watch air hunters it's daytime television so you don't have to admit to it air hunters it's about large sums of money that are left to family but they don't know who the family is because they lose touch and the air hunters hunt through the ancestry records what's the word for that that's the one ok they hunt through that to find who was married to who and who had who as a child and where they went to and they went to

America and then they came back and so on and it turns out that the person to whom these millions of pounds now come as an inheritance happens to be Mrs.

[34 : 50] Smith who just lives around the corner in Kingsbury Terrace or something like that and then they go around to her and she's really amazed who would have dreamed that I would have a part in auntie's millions almost like a message from an angel to hear that isn't it and it does but it does involve the engagement of the one who receives that message and the air hunter person says would you like to be signed up and we'll make sure you get these millions that are owed to you and I suppose Mrs.

Smith in Kingsbury Terrace could say nah not interested bit of a bad move I think on her part but she could say tell me more this sounds very strange wasn't expecting this I need to find out how it affects me give me a bit more information how can I receive the benefit of it and this story is a little bit like that it doesn't just happen automatically it does require your engagement with it it comes to you and it in it it evokes and requires a response from us yeah I'm going to take this further an engaging story and finally it's an incomplete story because it's all about a baby there's much more to the baby than this the baby doesn't just stay a baby he grew up as babies do and you might say what happened then read the rest of Luke's gospel and he died he died in an awful tragic way but he seemed to think that by dying that way he really achieved something that could be achieved no other way he didn't stay dead he rose from the dead and he says that one day he'll come and wrap up the whole universe so we'll all see him we'll all see him again and then we'll know then the story will be complete thank you very much for listening let's sing together number 350