

Christmas Eve 2021 - Receiving Reassurance

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[0 : 0 0] hey everyone my name's Matt the Vigour of St John's and a warm welcome back to these YouTube reflections in this Christmas season if you've been keeping up each week with our YouTube videos you'll know we've been back in the church building for services at St John's for a while now but with all that's going on the feeling was that we should err on the side of caution which sadly means we're not meeting in person over Christmas and just into the new year until it's a bit safer to do so hopefully that won't be too long but on the plus side and in the meantime we're back with these videos which you can watch in the comfort of your own pyjamas at least so every cloud and all that happy Christmas Eve to you a day for final preparations yeah but also a chance to just take some time out now to reflect on the meaning of all that the birth of Jesus as God with us is all about indeed we'll think further on that in a moment but God we want to take this opportunity to thank you for your ongoing love and care it's not just that you care about us but that you care for us the care which comes through your spirit with us but also through the strength and support we receive from one another

God you'll know the uncertainties we're facing in this season particularly with this Omicron variants being so contagious the debates which are happening between scientists and the government on what's best for us as a nation going forward the considerations we're having to give as individuals and households for how best to live in community at this time you know these are challenging times we're in and yet in the midst of this somewhat bleak midwinter there is the light of your hope peace joy and love through Jesus and your presence with us and so as we reflect on that truth now would you assure and inspire us afresh with that knowledge we pray thank you God amen now to get us going in our thoughts let's begin with some of the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus it's a passage from Luke's gospel chapter 2 which says this and there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby keeping watch over their flocks at night an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified but the angel said to them do not be afraid I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people today in the town of David a savior has been born to you he is the Messiah 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 heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests when the angels had left them and gone into heaven the shepherds said to one another let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about so they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger now it's a famous part of the Christmas story this mix of shepherds and angels without whom our nativity plays would be all the sparser and our carols would be all the poorer it's a combo of extremes though these shepherds and angels I mean on the ground level there are these shepherds who as we've said before were the lowest of the low in society real outcasts from the mainstream who were generally unliked untrusted and unwashed you know the unlikeliest of contenders to be the first to be given the good news of Jesus birth but then way above the shepherds are these angels up there with the highest of the highest of Christ of Christ of the high mysterious messengers from God at whom we marvel a heavenly choir whose heralding of the arrival of Jesus gives the occasion the backdrop it deserves seems to me there's something in this combination which we'd do well to keep hold of at Christmas the lowly shepherds alongside the cosmic choir earth and heaven in tandem together it's a truth which we see embodied in Jesus himself both in his arrival as a baby but also the way in which he himself later proclaims the building of his kingdom here on earth as in heaven so it seems we're meant to see in Jesus the eternal connection between God and us more accurately perhaps God with us in every way glory to God in the highest and on earth peace the angels sing revealing a way in which God in Jesus weaves his

life with ours a fabric in which both the vertical and the horizontal threads of life create the richest of life's tapestries a cross stitch if you like in more ways than one and yet it's worth noting I think some of the details of this encounter between the angels and the shepherds so for a start we're told that when the shepherds are in the fields an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified terrified not surprising perhaps given this angelic visitor and the glory

the shepherds see no doubt a dazzling light which shone around them you know for all the talk of peace on earth at Christmas and all that it's interesting that fear seems to be a regular occurrence in the Christmas story both Mary and Joseph and now these shepherds are told at various times to not be afraid an instruction that wouldn't be needed unless they were indeed feeling fearful I guess in some ways it's perhaps comforting for us to know that fear anxiety worry and so on are pretty common natural reactions when people are faced with unsettling experiences it may not be angelic visitations which freak us out but I know for me particularly with the ominous warnings of Omicron of late there is a returning sense of anxiety which many of us will currently be living with so how might we face these fears what are we to do with these concerns at this particular time of year well it seems that the shepherd's fear is responded to in two quite different ways you see firstly this angel tries to calm their fears do not be afraid says the angel I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people today in the town of David Bethlehem a savior has been born to you he is the Messiah the Lord this will be a sign to you you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger and it's affirming message you know these are words of reassurance of joy of hope from the angel and he's the first to the people of God's love he is the first to the angel of love and these shepherds obviously took these words to heart since we have a written record of them a record which presumably meant that the shepherds passed on to others what the angel had first said to them

I know for me I'm sure for you we receive comfort from the words of others calming words of kindness from those we trust so my fears are calmed for example when I hear a scientist reassuring us that vaccines and boosters remain highly effective in lessening the severity of the virus my worries are put in perspective by the rational common sense of a friend my hope is strengthened when I hear someone at church express their faith in God's goodness words are powerful and when we're feeling anxious we do well to make sure the ones we listen to are from those we trust and probably not random online strangers with their own agenda to push and yet what's interesting for these shepherds is that there's a second way in which their fears are addressed by God because not only did they hear from this individual angel in a rational sense you know giving him an explanation and instructions of what to do and where to go and where to go and so on but alongside that they're then reassured in a relational sense too as this angel is then joined by a whole choir of angels suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests now we've got no idea how many angels there were but a great company implies there were a lot of them why a huge choir of angels well on one level as we said it's a fitting backdrop of praise to the birth of Jesus and the spectacle must have validated for the shepherds what this individual angel had told them but it seems to me on another more personal level it's almost as if God knew that the shepherds needed more than just a rational explanation in order to have their fears allayed and so they're given front row seats to this angelic performance because it seems they needed an emotional experience too hearing songs of praise to God which captivate their hearts as well as their minds and captivated they were because when the angels leave it's then that the shepherds rush off to Bethlehem to see the newborn Jesus what might this all say to us though in our fears our current anxieties certainly our concerns well it seems to me that alongside whatever rational explanations and common sense we can absorb to allay our fears there's a need for us to be emotionally relationally reassured too words as we said are powerful in and of themselves but there's a need for our hearts as well as our minds to know God's calming peace this Christmas is the most important thing to know God's calming peace this Christmas and yet you'll know as well as me that this Christmas when churches like ours are not meeting in person and others are doing so in much more restricted ways when the usual Christmas parties at least outside of Downing Street are not happening when whatever communal or family gatherings we can manage risk being disrupted at the last minute by positive

[13 : 13] Covid tests and so on it's hard to know where our emotional sustenance let alone our spiritual sustenance might come from indeed it's almost as if in a year when we could really do with

hearing a choir of angels singing above us instead the skies are eerily quiet and the celebrations of the season are somewhat muted so what might the answer to this be for us this year well I want to play a clip from this year's Strictly Come Dancing clip which went viral a few weeks ago of a dance between Rose and Giovanni now Rose as we may well know is deaf and so in this clip we'll see how the couple paid tribute to the experience of the deaf community

Dancing their couple's choice Rose Ayling Ellis and Giovanni Penicche I'm dancing on the music I've been hearing symphonies I've been hearing symphonies Before all I heard was silence A rhapsody for you and me And every melody is timeless Now your song is on repeat Now your song is on repeat I'm dancing on to your heartbeat And when you're gone I feel incomplete If you want the truth I just want to be part of your symphony I't be hangin' I'm hungin' tired and I'll let go I'm hungin' tight I'm not let go Symphony I'm dancing on the radio

I'm hungin' tight and I'll let go Oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh And when you've gone, I feel incomplete, so you want the truth.

I just want to be part of the symphony, if you hold me tight and I'll let go.

It was an incredibly powerful moment in the series, a brilliant illustration of the silence experienced by those who, like Rose, are deaf.

[16:37] And yet what made it so moving was the way in which the dance continued in the silence, where despite the lack of sound, despite the lack of an angelic choir, if you like, this couple chose to carry on with their dance.

And it seems to me that even though this Christmas may well be quieter than we might have wished, even though we might be missing out on gathering together at St John's to sing, even though our ability to be lifted by the company of others may be limited.

Even in the silence, the simplicity, the solitude, God's invitation to us remains to continue the dance of life with Him.

And so there's an opportunity, I would say, in the midst of this strange season, to know the steadfast, synchronising, sustaining love of God in new ways this year.

That maybe in the stripped back simplicity, in the times of solitude, in the relative silence, even.

Maybe there's an opportunity for us to partner in new ways with the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

[18:14] Just as the shepherds were surprised by the vision of angels before them, perhaps our prayer today might be that we too would be surprised by God this year.

Just by the ways in which the divine presence, the divine dance is made known to us over the coming days.

I don't know what those ways for you might be, but I do know that God will be with us since that is the promise of Christmas.

Indeed, in light of what we've been reflecting on, we're going to listen to a gentle but joyful song, which the St John's band have kindly recorded for us this week, a worship song for the season called Christmas Offering.

Christmas Offering
Summer Over the skies of Bethlehem appeared a star
While angels sang to lowly shepherds
Three wise men seeking truth
They traveled from afar
Hoping to find the child from heaven
Falling on their knees
They bow before the humble Prince of Peace
I bring an offering of worship to my King

[20:10] No one on earth deserves the praises that I sing
Jesus may you receive the honour that you're due
O Lord I bring an offering to you
I bring an offering to you
The sun cannot compare to the glory of your love
There is no shadow in your presence
No mortal man would dare to stand before your throne
Before the Holy One of Heaven
It's only by your blood

And it's only through your mercy
Lord I come I bring an offering of worship to my King
No one on earth deserves the praises that I sing
Jesus may you receive the honour that you're due
O Lord I bring an offering to you
I bring an offering of worship to my King
No one on earth deserves the praises that I sing
Jesus may you receive the honour that you're due
O Lord I bring an offering to you

O Lord I bring an offering to you
I bring an offering to you
I bring an offering to you
I bring an offering to you
Fantastic All right we'll be back with another offering here on YouTube tomorrow for Christmas Day
So do feel free to tune in for that at a time which suits your day
Until then though may you know God's company and God's comfort on this Christmas Eve
And may God bless you

and all those you've been given to love and live alongside both now and always
Amen Amen