

The Wonder Of Christmas In Our Uncertain Times

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[0 : 00] The slight interruption and the ordered progression of the service as you find it in your leaflet. And part of it is that my name is Harry Robinson and I'm about to preach a brief sermon.

And when it comes to the time when I'm supposed to read a lesson, I won't. But Ernie Eldridge will. And so with that, you should be able to make your way through to the end.

I'd like you to look at Luke chapter 2, verses 1 to 20. Two of the lessons that have just preceded this have been read.

And the third part of the lesson, which continues down to verse 20, and is found in your pew Bible on page 55. I am greatly encouraged to break into this carol service by having read this week the words of Bishop Hugh Latimer, who was one of the bishops who was burned at the stake on the streets of Oxford.

And during the course of that, his fellow bishop, Bishop Ridley, who was being burned at the same time, Hugh Latimer called out to him, Well, that was their martyrdom.

[1 : 38] But Hugh Latimer at one other time referred to candles, and he said that the church of his day was very much given to candles, and very little given to preaching.

And he would like to change it around. And so I think there's a necessity to keep at least some balance. Candles are so perfect and so quiet and so aesthetically pleasing that it's probably good that you should hear a sermon to disturb the peace into which you might be lulled by the beauty of them.

The thing I want to tell you in brief is two proclamations which are made. The first proclamation is that which is spoken of in chapter 2, verse 1, and it's a decree from Caesar Augustus, the emperor of Rome and the one who held sway from England to Persia.

And he held sway at a time when this story took place, and there was a peace which held the whole of that empire together at that point.

And that decree by Caesar Augustus was that the whole world should be enrolled in order to be taxed.

[3 : 07] And if you read through that first paragraph, you will find that many of the current social problems are there underlined again. hierarchies, bureaucracies, taxations, travel under congested conditions, accommodation and housing that was difficult to find, and the ongoing industry of shepherds keeping their watch over their flocks by night.

And so you have a very real-to-life picture. And it's into that world that the proclamation of Caesar Augustus comes, and Joseph and Mary are summoned from high up in Nazareth down to Bethlehem, where they are to be registered under this imperial edict.

The other proclamation, if you read the story further, is made by an angel. And it's in verse 10 of chapter 2, where it says, Be not afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which shall come to all the people.

For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. A far greater emperor than ever Caesar Augustus was, who came from a far greater throne than ever Caesar Augustus dreamed of, and spoke with far greater authority than ever Caesar Augustus had, and was backed up by a far greater army than ever Caesar Augustus knew.

So this was an edict with tremendous authority behind it, and it was pronounced by an angel to the shepherds who were on the hillside that night.

[5 : 10] One was the declaration of a kind of peace which belonged to a great empire. The other was the declaration of the establishment of an eternal kingdom.

It's interesting that the army of the living God breaks through into this scene, and with a song of praise, the heavenly hosts say, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with

whom he is pleased.

And the glory which belonged to the Roman emperor, the glory which, when he stood at the head of his armies, surrounded by his governors, all the glory and the pomp and majesty that human tradition could afford to him were granted to him, temples were built to him, and yet his was very much a fading splendor.

And the eternal splendor were given a glimpse of when the hosts of the army of the living God break through and are constrained to shout, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.

And then, in verse 15, the angels went away. They were gone. The night was dark again.

[6 : 54] The shepherds made their way down to Bethlehem to check out the message which had been given to them by the angels. And there, just as the angels had said, was the sign they sought.

They found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. This is the one of whom the Hallelujah Chorus is written, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, lying in a manger.

And they saw it because somehow they had been prepared to see it. They went and told others of what had happened to them.

First the angels spoke to us and said this would happen. Then we went and with our own eyes saw that it happened, and we want to tell you about it. And so they did.

The response they got for this was that people wondered. In verse 18, you read that all the people who heard it wondered at what the shepherds had said.

[8 : 15] Of course, I think for many people, wonder is the thing that we want to have at Christmastime. We want to wonder at the amazing things that happen.

We want to wonder at the story that we're told. We want to wonder at the possibilities it marches before our eyes. We want to wonder at the panorama of a heavenly host.

Forty million angels crying glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill towards men. We want to wonder at that.

But alas, soon the moment of wonder is over. And as the angels go back into heaven and the shepherds return to their sheep, so we go back to taxes, overcrowding, travel under congested conditions, bureaucracy, hierarchies, edicts, tyranny, and we subject ourselves again to that and fight within the structures of it for some moment of personal peace and try and hold together the fragile peace which fear creates and which is all the kingdoms of this world can afford to give us, we wonder for a moment and then return to our subjection to the royal edict of an imperial Caesar.

But there was one there who was in strong contrast to those who came and wondered and went their way. There was one, we're told, of whom it says, Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.

[10 : 23] These things now belong to Mary. She stored them in her heart and she pondered upon them and they belonged to her and she watched the unfolding of the drama of salvation.

she heard the story of the angels one day and within a few days she heard the story of how her own heart would be pierced through as with a sword and she kept these things and meditated on them in her heart.

all of us are caught up in the business and the tyranny of our world. The survival under the imperial edict, the peace which is held together by fear, those belong to our daily life.

but as we hear the message of the angels, as we receive the witness of the shepherds, as we read again the Christmas story, may we, like Mary, store these things in our hearts and wonder about them and recognize that in the babe of Bethlehem a kingdom has been established, in which peace is not from fear but from faith.

A kingdom is established in which an absolute tyrant is not the ruler but an anointed king is Lord.

And, and that's who we are and that's who we're to be and that's the kingdom to which we are to belong.

[12 : 21] So God grant that this Christmas may not be for us a time of wondering for a moment and then submitting ourselves again to the secular tyranny that surrounds us.

But that it might be something which the shepherds took with them when they returned to their work and with which this passage ends. The shepherds returned to their sheep, to the hills, to the night and to the darkness.

They returned glorifying God and praising God as they remembered all that had been told them.

may we return to our world and to our work glorifying and praising God and bearing in mind all that has been told us about a kingdom which begins not with an absolute tyrant, the head of his hierarchy, with the authority of his armies, but a king who is a babe in a manger and whose kingdom will not end.
Amen.