

Dear Friends,

Luke 2: 13-20

An angel has just announced the birth of Jesus to some shepherds. The one angel is then joined by "a multitude of the heavenly host" who sing a song of praise to God. They sing of glory in heaven and peace on earth. Glory is the shining brightness of God. God is merciful, gracious, and abounding in steadfast love. Heaven is filled with the radiance of what God is.

As heaven is filled with God's glory so earth is filled with God's peace. Earth is reconciled with God. People and the whole creation are restored to an intimate relationship with God. Through this, they may receive God's life and gifts. God's peace is much more than an absence of conflict, it's about all relationships, at every level, being put right. It's about people and the cosmos being open to receive God's blessings.

This peace comes to those whom God favours. The point here is not that there are some who receive peace because God favours them while there are others who don't. Rather, the point is that peace is only given through God's favour. That is, it is God's initiative to give peace. It is not because of the merit of those on earth, or in response to anything they have done. It is not because they deserve it. It is purely and simply, God's gracious gift, given out of God's favour.

The song of the angel will find an echo when Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Then the crowds will talk of, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven". At that moment Jesus will be close to the cross. This is perhaps one of Luke's ways of drawing attention to how God's peace is given. It is through Jesus and his suffering and death on the cross that people are restored to their relationship with God, through which the peace of God may flow to all the earth.

Once they have sung their song, the angels leave and return to their home in heaven. The shepherds also get moving. After Mary was given a message from an angel, she made haste to see Elizabeth. Now the shepherds have been given a message from an angel and they make haste to go and find Mary and Joseph and the child in a manger.

There is a contrast between the first and second parts of the story that Luke is telling. In part one, he told of how the Emperor in Rome had given a message which got everyone moving. In part two, he tells of an angel from heaven who gives a message which gets shepherds moving. When we were looking at part one, I said what more important person could there be than the Emperor and what more important place could there be than Rome? Well, now we have a message from an angel in heaven. Surely an angel trumps an Emperor and heaven trumps Rome.

The Emperor's message was for all the world and it was bad news. It was all about what the Emperor could take and get out of people. The angel's message is also for

all the people, but it is good news. It's all about what God can give. God graciously chooses to give a child who will save the people and give the earth peace.

I wonder how difficult it was for the shepherds to find Mary, Joseph and Jesus. I imagine it would not have been too hard. Bethlehem was a small settlement, not many people were living there and when a baby was born, they probably all knew about it pretty quickly. The shepherds find the child lying in a manger and they make known what they had been told about the child. When good news of great joy has been given to you, you can't keep it to yourself, you just have to share it. I wonder if this is one of the reasons the message was given to shepherds. Had it been given to the powerful or the religious leaders, they might have thought, "This belongs to us, we don't need to share it with all of those others". The shepherds by contrast just go about telling the story so that everyone gets to hear it. It is after all "for all the people". And all who hear what they say are amazed. It fills them with wonder.

Mary hears the words of the shepherds and she treasures and ponders them in her heart. Mary is a thoughtful reflective person. She questions what she has heard. She wonders what it all means. She is always open to new insights that might be given to her. And she does not only think with her mind, she thinks in her heart, through her feelings. Her heart is open to God, who cleanses the thoughts of her heart. The change in her thoughts produces a change in her actions. She finds herself, renewed, transformed, made better.

The shepherds return. They go back to their everyday lives, their families, and their jobs. But they too are transformed. They go back glorifying and praising God. Their fear has gone and been replaced by great joy which fills their hearts.

The message of the Emperor and the message of the angel got people moving. They got up and went forth. What does the message of the birth of Jesus say to you? Where might it get you moving?

May God bless you. May your heart be a manger, filled with the presence of Jesus. Through him may you be given peace, wonder and great joy.

Happy Christmas,

Tony