

St Peter's Church Bournemouth

Christmas Eve 2015

Sermon by Captain Philip Johanson CA: OBE

Isaiah 9 v.2-7: Titus 2 v.11-14: Luke 2 v.1-14

Well it's Christmas Eve in what we are told has been the mildest December for 100 years – no chance of a white Christmas then! However for a moment can you cast your minds back to summer – you remember summer - that day in August or was it July. Imagine you were in the New Forest having a family picnic, or away on a camping holiday, when suddenly, apparently from nowhere, the St Peter's Singers appear and start singing before your very eyes. What would be your reaction? How would you respond?

That was the kind of experience that confronted those shepherds in the field outside of Bethlehem at that first Christmas.

Now I am not suggesting the St. Peter's Singers are a multitude of the heavenly host – perhaps nearly - but not quite!! Nor am I suggesting that Duncan Courts, the Director of Music is an Angel of the Lord – although he might be!

I guess your reaction might be one of surprise, or disbelief. Are you seeing and hearing things. Is your mind playing tricks with you?

That was the kind of situation that confronted those shepherds in the field outside the town of Bethlehem at that first Christmas. All they were doing is what they always did – they were looking after their sheep and keeping them safe. They were minding their own business as we might say.

God used the unusual and the unexpected to convey his message – [The message to the shepherds that is – not to you in the New Forest or on a camping holiday!] It was a message that over time would be life changing, a message that would change the world and a message that would lead us from B.C to A.D in our record of time.

As with so much in the Christmas story the arrival of the angel with the heavenly choir was but a sign, or a sign post – a sign to the shepherds of what had taken place and what they were to do. As we think again of that Christmas story we need to read it as a sign or a sign post – not in the sense that the event itself was not true or did not happen– but as a sign or a sign post to that to which it was leading.

The danger is we are apt to bring out the crib, re-live the story, sing the carols, give the presents and eat the food, and forget that the baby of Bethlehem became the man who cared, who gave, who fed the hungry and who healed the sick and was ultimately nailed to a cross. There was life after Christmas for the Son of God! The baby – the Christ Child of Christmas - became a man, died and rose again and is alive today in the lives of those who follow him. The Nativity scene with the crib, the Holy family, the animals and the visitors are but a sign or a sign post, pointing us ahead.

We know in life that things do not stand still – so it is with the Christmas story – it was in one regard a starting point - life moved on. Jesus became a man; he lived, died and rose again.

To concentrate on the manger and to forget why it was mentioned in the first place is to miss the point. To concentrate on the Nativity scene and to forget why it took place is to miss the point. The angel and the heavenly host was a sign to the shepherds of what had taken place in Bethlehem. The shepherds followed the sign and they went into the town to discover for themselves – nothing can replace real life experience. We are called to do the same - To discover for ourselves the true meaning of that first Christmas, and with the help of Christ to live out that meaning – that message throughout the coming year.

The Angel and the heavenly host, the heavenly choir, was a sign to the shepherds of what had happened and what they must do – go and see for themselves. Not only were the angel and the heavenly host a sign to the shepherds, so also was the manger itself. The angel had said to them in the fields outside Bethlehem 'You will find a baby lying in a manger'. (Luke 2 v 12) That manger enabled the shepherds to know which baby they were looking for and where. The Gospel reading for today says of the shepherds, 'they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in a manger' verse 16

Down the centuries since, countless people have followed the sign through worship, through the Bible, through discussion and experience and have discovered for themselves the reality of that first Christmas in their lives. The sign of the angel, the heavenly host and the manger – is a reminder to us to search for the true meaning of Christmas. To search for that which is real, that which is genuine and that which is lasting.

It is true in life that the real meaning; or the things that last are not always obvious at first sight. I have a fridge magnet which says 'Friends are the family you choose'. Most people have happy families and experience good relationships but that is not always true. In such situations, friends become even more important – perhaps no more so than at this time of year. Friendships that are real and that last don't usually happen overnight and they are not always obvious. We have to work at them.

The angel and the heavenly host were a sign to the shepherds: To go and search and to find the Christ Child in the manger in the stable. The shepherds themselves are a sign to us, reminding us that the Good News announcing the birth of Jesus was first given to ordinary people. We are included – that is if we consider ourselves to be ordinary!

In those days shepherds did not have a good reputation. (I'm not suggesting that is true for you!) Their work kept them from observing the ceremonial law, which was so important to the religious people of that time. Shepherds were considered to be unreliable and not able to give testimony in a court of law. In one respect they were not ordinary - some people would have described them as rogues. Perhaps as some people are called loveable rogues! – Still they were by most comparisons ordinary people. Yet, it was to such that the angel came with the Good News. The Good News was not first given to kings and rulers rather it was given to ordinary people, the likes of you and me. It is a sign to us that good news can be found in the most unusual situations and given to the most surprising people.

Several years ago I was in a number of townships in South Africa. I spent some time visiting a number of safe houses for children most of them there as a result of HIV/Aids. In one house of eleven children all under the age of ten, four of them were HIV/Aids positive – one of them, 3 years old had been there since he was about three days old, his mother having left him. There I came into contact with Christian people expressing love and caring for young people - A sign of good news in an unusual situation.

The Angel, the heavenly host and the shepherds are all signs. The Nativity scene with the manger is also a sign to us, reminding us that Jesus was born into the mess and the muddle of human life. Sleeping in a manger, sheltered in a stable for there was no room in the inn. It is in that kind of situation God often finds the likes of you and me - In the mess and the muddle of human life - Amidst the questions, the pain, the suffering and the rejection in life.

Looking back over the year there has been plenty of mess and muddle and more; affecting so many people. Most recently we have seen the flooding in our own country especially in Cumbria - leaving people homeless at Christmas. Then we have the ongoing challenge of homeless people in our towns and cities - Jesus began life homeless born in a stable – That doesn't make it right! [Monday Church here at St Peter's in partnership with the Salvation Army is a way of demonstrating Good News to homeless people in our own town – showing that people do care]. We have seen the refugee crisis escalate beyond our imagination. [Jesus as a baby had to flee with his parents for safety from Bethlehem to Egypt – He too was a refugee. [It is right and proper that Christians should be involved with such people today]. We have the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. There is an alarming rate of senseless killing through guns and knives on our own streets – in the USA, in Paris and on the African continent. And so the list could go on.

It is into this kind of situation that Christ was born. The circumstances may have been different but the mess, the muddle and the conflict were as real. Jesus was born in a stable, sleeping in a manger – born into the mess and muddle of human life.

Isaiah reminds us in our Old Testament reading today that Jesus was to be called the 'Prince of Peace' Today his peace and his love is lived out through you and me as we experience afresh that Christmas story and we ourselves follow the signs that lead to life, to hope and to love. He understands – he has been there before us. He calls us in that kind of situation to be his light, his hope and his life in the mess and the muddle we have made of his world.

We have the sign of the angel and the heavenly host, the sign of the shepherds, and the sign of the manger. Then there is the sign of the Wise Men who travelled far with their gifts for the Christ Child: A sign perhaps of the cost of Christian discipleship. We are apt to take too much for granted and to treat it so lightly. Not so even today in certain parts of the world.

In the news today we heard that in Brunei it has been announced that if you are caught celebrating Christmas in any way at all you will be sentenced to five years in prison. A similar law exists in Somalia. Recently Crosses have been removed from buildings in China and some church buildings have been demolished. On a much smaller scale cinemas in our own country banned an advertisement about the Lord's Prayer and then this week they have banned an advertisement portraying the Nativity. Small in comparison to what is happening in some parts of the world: however what next for the UK?

The Christmas story is a sign of what was to be. The sign of the shepherds – the good news is for ordinary people found in unusual situations and by surprising people. The sign of the manger reminds us of the mess and muddle of human life. The sign of the angel and the heavenly host – that amidst the mess and muddle there is good news. The sign of the Wise Men – reminding us of the cost involved in following, in worshipping and in giving to the living Christ.

As we celebrate Christmas and begin to think about the year ahead the link between the two is to learn from the past as we move into the future. For the past needs to inform the present and help to shape the future. Signposts in life that help to keep us on the right path in our journey through life

The Christmas story then is more than the credit card bill. It is a sign to the way ahead. The song of the heavenly host on that first Christmas was: 'Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace to men and women on whom his favour rests.' The story is told of a church with those words - 'Glory to God in the Highest' painted over an arch at the front of the church. The paint had started to wear and the letter 'e' missing – so it read: Glory to God in the High Street. If we embrace the true meaning of Christmas and seek to live it out in the coming year we will help bring about Glory in the High Street making our communities and our world a much better place in which to live.

A Happy Christmas and a Peaceful New Year and may you be part of the ongoing story – a sign of hope in the future.