

This passage we all know so well. If you had been whisked away by aliens for a long time and you were suddenly plonked down into church again and heard this reading, then you would know that it was coming close to Christmas. It's the declaration from the angels of God heralding to the shepherds about the coming of the Messiah.

And yet this story as you look at it, even though it is so familiar, is going so wrong. You see the way God does things is very upside down compared to how we would expect things to happen. Last year you may remember we had our trees outside the Church hanging upside down, to signify that God comes and does things in a way that is rather unexpected. A virgin giving birth. The King of all Kings born in an animal trough. A saviour coming to serve and not to be served. Today's economics work on the basis that power counts for everything – people covet more possession and acclaim, whereas God operates around meekness and lowliness. You see where this story is going today is that the Good News isn't being proclaimed to the Governors and Princes of the land. The heralding of the Kingdom of God did not fall on those who were morally upright, but rather on those who were broken and helpless. It comes to Shepherds.

Shepherds in those days were considered as absolute dirt. In a Court of law any evidence given by a shepherd would have had no authenticity. They were considered to be liars, thieves and unclean, that they were not considered accepted within society. They were looked upon as outside the covenant promises of God. Because of what they did every day they could never obey the cleanliness laws of the Jewish people, and therefore the religious elite saw them as filthy and unwanted. And yet when it comes time to herald the good news – as Isaiah declares to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, God chooses not to come to the elite, but instead to the broken and hopeless.

And therefore that brings me to my first thought today about us. Some people who are not Christians feel that God or religion doesn't like them because he judges them for all the bad things they've done – that he doesn't see anything good in them – they've got to change before they will ever be welcome. For example have you seen the news in the past week, where the First Minister Paul Givan has had to justify to his elders in the Free Presbyterian Church why he attended the ecumenical service in St Patrick's Cathedral Armagh to mark the 100th anniversary of Northern Ireland. Whatever you think of that, the issue is that people who are not Christians are observing and querying the judgmental nature of God's people. Now it may not ever be as extreme as that but you can start building barriers about who you invite into our churches and in doing so you are creating an image for people of a God who only connects with a certain type and therefore excludes others.

But God sending his Good News message to Shepherds is actually a pattern of how Jesus will do his ministry. Look at Mark 2:15. 'While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Now I don't know about your house, but I think we have lost the art of dinner. The truth is that Nathan very rarely wants to eat with us now. I'm usually rushing off to a meeting and therefore end up shovelling my dinner into me in a few minutes, or coming back after a meeting and eating late. There doesn't seem to be the same time to sit and talk over food. But when it says that Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, it would have lasted a few hours, and in that meal there would be lots of rich conversation. It really bothered the religious elite that Jesus was willing to hang out that amount of time with tax collectors and sinners. It was constantly murmured at to discredit Jesus' ministry. He's guilty by association, and yet we see Jesus being serious about sin, serious about salvation, serious about repentance, and yet the friend of sinners.

I may have told you before about my old work colleagues from England who I meet up with every few months. We have been friends for years now and our gatherings are always fun occasions. Now I have to be honest, I would definitely feel uncomfortable to invite any of you along to those gatherings – the language is rather choice by some of them, some of them choose not to come for breakfast the next morning due to the consumption of alcohol they have had the night before, and yet every time I meet there are always pockets of conversation and opportunity to talk about God. I wish I could say that in the middle of that pub or in that curry house that God's Spirit reaches down like the Day of Pentecost and revival breaks out. That certainly isn't the case but God is certainly at work. Jesus is the friend of sinners. Jesus is playing in this space, in this world, but he's not off it. So here's where I am at today. If today you come here as someone who hasn't surrendered your life to Jesus, then it's my prayer today that you know this Christmas that the coming of Jesus is about God's friendship towards you and not him coming with just a set of commandments that you have to obey before you have his love. That love should be shown in his Church today. John 3:17 takes this Christmas picture of the baby coming and his purpose for you and me – let me read it to you – 'For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him'. Jesus is the friend of sinners. This means that God's church cannot build walls meaning that we consider ourselves better than others – it means that things like our Compassion ministries must be the bridge for people to be further welcomed into the wider church family. It's not good if we welcome people in with Baby basics or School uniforms or whatever, but they never feel the welcome in our Sunday worship. Our doors must be open. Lost people cannot be our latest projects – our welcome must be so genuine, and so today's Churches have to ask God to give us the love that he desperately has for the shepherds in our society. Feel the burden for those who don't love Jesus. Plea to the Lord in prayer for them, and ask him to speak into your heart for opportunities to engage with them. What is the incarnation of Jesus Christ except than to dwell among us – sinners. And that's why you see angels, messengers of the most high, engaging with Shepherds about the good news.

So God chooses to bring good news of the saviour's birth to those whom society would never consider as important. There cannot be a greater declaration. And the heavens know how important it is. I'm guessing that these heavenly hosts have been waiting for this moment, because it truly marks the beginning of the end of the tranny of sin. Jesus will come and he will save the world. And so we get the excitement of

this declaration as the Shepherds are surrounded by a great company of the heavenly host praising God with these words “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests”.

Now if you were to read the King James version it may confuse you as to what type of peace Jesus is bringing here. Listen to what verse 14 says in the King James - “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men”. And you might think, that’s what Christmas is all about isn’t it. A feeling of peace. Well no. That was a poor translation. A better translation is what we use today “on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests”

Let’s not think that the praises of the heavenly hosts is declaring that everyone has peace at this time of the year, because we look around us and see that that is definitely not the case. There’s a danger in thinking that Jesus comes and universally brings peace to everyone, even if they don’t accept it. That universalist view of the Christian faith is false. Therefore we all need to face up to the fact that you and I are broken from birth. We are rebellious against our creator. Romans 3:23 says that ‘All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God’. Our relationship with God is fractured, and the implications of that is death (Romans 6:23) ‘The wages of sin is death, **but** the gift of God is eternal life’ Therefore folks we need Jesus. Your family this Christmas need Jesus as he reconciles us to God.

The reality is that our minds are naturally hostile to God. Christmas can become a classic example of that where everything becomes the focus – the tree, the ordering of the turkey, the presents, and then Jesus becomes the thing for the odd hour we have for the Carol Service once a year where it’s the most busy service we have. Here’s what Romans 8:7 says, “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot’. We are hostile to God, and we need something to reconcile that. How many of us can recall those moments in our children’s lives or relatives children where you have seen that hostility to the parents as the child belts out those defiant words ‘NO’. And it doesn’t change the entirety of our lives – we’re been handed a gift from God, and we reply like some rebellious child, ‘I don’t need it, I don’t want it, I want this instead’. Something has to change, and that’s why Jesus came.

The hymn Hark the Herald Angels sing explains clearly what this verse is all about ‘God and sinners reconciled’. Our life is incomplete and without true peace unless we have Jesus. Peace doesn’t come without reconciliation. And reconciliation doesn’t come without love expressed. And Jesus expresses that love in his ultimate sacrifice for us. A reconciliation must take place with God, and that is through Jesus. God makes peace where the wages of sin is death. The coming of Christ means the bringing of peace between the hostility of your rebellion against God and God’s wrath towards your rebellion. Jesus steps into the middle of all of this and brings the peace of his blood shed on the cross, taking all of God’s wrath and replaces it with his grace. Jesus makes peace between us and God. God and sinners reconciled.

And so this passage gives us a glimpse into how the angels are mesmerised with what is happening. They observe God and sinner being reconciled. As they see Jesus’ death on the cross and people being rescued, they declare their praises in the heavenly realms ‘Glory to God in the highest’. It’s that magnificent. And yet we are

so familiar with the words here that we kind a go – yeah alright. Let's once again engage with the implications for all of us from these words. Do you understand the depth of that reconciliation that has taken place for you? And so where is that reconciling peace showing up in our lives? It doesn't mean that all your relationships this Christmas, especially the strained ones with family, are suddenly going to be harmonious. It doesn't mean that. But it does teach us that that reconciling peace between God and man is demonstrated when we share Jesus with others. We love others because he first loved us. When people realise that Jesus has come to be a friend of sinners, not to condemn, then a freedom is truly released. But that requires you and me to share it this Christmas.

The other thing we need to engage with is this - we've got to not worry about the things that are not ours to worry about. We've got to recognise we are at peace with God, and therefore in that place to hand over to God the things that are not ours to carry. Spurgeon says, "As long as a man is alive, and is out of hell, he has no cause to complain". So what are the things that occupy our minds? Jesus has made peace between us and God – surely that is all we need to remember? Paul says to the people in Colossae 'Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful'.

So this Christmas, tell the true story of peace between God and humanity to those you know. Re-engage for yourself what that peace means for you and your own relationship with God through Jesus. Rejoice as we gather together over these next number of weeks, everyone welcomed, the shepherds and everyone, to hear and be reminded of the beginning of the end of the story that peace has been established between us and the Lord.