Christ has Come
Luke 2:1-20

In our Advent series this year, we're looking at some of the key players in the stories surrounding Jesus' birth. And today we're looking at the shepherds. And I've got three points: the bottom and the top; a surprising announcement; and for whom Christ comes.

The Bottom and the Top

Now, if you're at all acquainted with the Christmas story, the presence of shepherds at the birth of Christ doesn't surprise you, does it? I mean, a Christmas nativity play would simply not be a Christmas nativity play without a bunch of shepherds dressed up with washing-up towels on their heads and a curtain tie holding it all together!

And yet, if you were a first century Jewish person, the presence of shepherds in the account of the birth of God's Son would have been at least eye-opening, probably startling and quite possibly shocking. You see, at the heart of the Christmas story that we had read to us from Luke's gospel, is a profound contrast. And that contrast is between these shepherds in the fields and Caesar Augustus in Rome, and to which of those the angels made their announcement, and among whom it was that Christ was born.

I mean, think about the shepherds. In chapter 2v8 Luke tells us, 'And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.' Now there was a time in Israel's history when to be a shepherd was considered a good thing – after all, King David, Israel's greatest king, had begun his career as just such a shepherd. And in what's probably the most famous and best loved of all the Bible's psalms, God is likened to a shepherd in Psalm 23: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.' But by the time of Jesus' birth all that had changed, and no one now had a good word to say about shepherds. And it didn't matter where you were on the social ladder, you could always look down on shepherds, because they were at the bottom of the food chain. And societies nearly always do this, don't they – some ethnic group, some social class – who everyone else can despise and blame. And at this point in history, it was shepherds who were stigmatised and despised as lazy and untrustworthy. And you weren't supposed to buy anything off a shepherd because it was almost certainly stolen. In fact, so looked down upon were they that if you happened to come across a shepherd who had fallen into a pit, as apparently one might, you know, you're out for a Sunday stroll, hear someone calling, and you wander over and lo and behold it's a shepherd, in a pit, you weren't even required to help them out – they deserved to be there: 'come along darling, let's move on, he' a shepherd.' So maybe not surprisingly given this degree of prejudice, by the time of Jesus certain Rabbis questioned how God could possibly describe himself as a shepherd in that famous Psalm 23…. I mean, what was he thinking? So, if you were Jewish, and you heard the account of Jesus' birth, you'd be thinking, 'Shepherds? What are they doing there?'

But, if shepherds were at the bottom of the food chain, on the lowest rung of the social ladder, the story of Jesus' birth also contains the guy right at the top, the man covered in glory – the man everyone wanted to know. Luke chapter 2v1, 'In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be

registered.' And Caesar Augustus was undisputed emperor of the world's superpower. Here was a man who had powerful men, like Quirinius, governor of Syria, under him. Here was a man who could issue a command from Rome, that everyone be enrolled in a census, and everyone obeyed. And given that this census was almost certainly to do with paying taxes, and as any of you Americans can testify, you know who's in authority over you when you have to pay them taxes, then there's no question who the one with the power and the glory is in this story. And it's not the shepherds.

So, whilst Rabbis wondered how God could ever compare himself to a shepherd, Caesar Augustus wasn't simply compared to a god, he was considered a god. And on the coins of the day he was styled Saviour of the world, Son of the divine.

So, at the heart of the story of Jesus' birth is this deep contrast between the man at the top, and those at the bottom.

Great, you might think, but what has that got to do with you and me? Well, think about who it is that Jesus' birth is announced to. And think about who you're more like – the shepherds, or Caesar.

A Surprising Announcement

Over the last couple of weeks the UK press has been full of news of Prince Harry's engagement to Meghan Markle, and it seems there's nothing people like more than stories of royalty and celebrity, and fame and beauty. And given that at the time of Jesus' birth there was no royalty like Caesar's and no palace greater than his, wouldn't you expect the birth of God's son to be announced there, even take place there?

And yet the very opposite happens; and the angels don't appear to the guy at the top, they come to those at the very bottom – to those society thought least of, to the marginalised and the looked down upon, to the despised and the stigmatised. Verse 9, 'And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.' And fear is an appropriate response to the greatness and the glory of God isn't it? Especially when you've been fed a line that you're worthless and the lowest of the low.

And yet the angel tells them, v10, "Fear not." That instead of fear or dread their hearts could be filled with joy – and he tells them why, "For behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." Now, can you get a feel for how extraordinary that is? That the greatest announcement, the proclamation of the birth of the Son of God, *the* Saviour of the World, comes not to the guy who considered himself son of god, and saviour of the world, but to those who everyone else despised. And God chooses the least and the last to be the first to hear, whilst the greatest is left out of the loop. And the real Saviour is born, not in a Roman palace, but in a stable – in a shepherd's workshop, if you like, and laid in a manger, from which the shepherds' sheep might have eaten.

So, with all the glory of Rome on offer, Christ is born among the lowest. And Mary takes him and wraps him in strips of cloth, and lays him in that manger, because not even the inn, not even the local tavern, had room for him. Just as society had no room for shepherds

But the question remains, doesn't it, what has this got to do with you and me? Great for the shepherds, but we're not the shepherds.

For Whom Christ Comes

Now, the mere fact that you're an international living in Switzerland tells you that you're not much like the shepherds – I mean, none of us could claim to be at the bottom of the ladder. And yet, you probably don't think you're at the top either. Sure you might be further up the ladder than a shepherd, but you're not much like Caesar are you? No one mints a coin with your picture on it, do they? In fact, the only thing carrying our images are our ID cards or passports – which tells you which Caesar we belong to. And no regional governors answer to you do they! In fact, you have to pay taxes to them. And as for a Roman palace, you can barely afford the rent on your Swiss apartment!

And yet, think for a moment how like Caesar we are. He was the one in charge – and deep down, isn't that what we want? And you know those times when you chafe on the inside when someone tells you what to do. And whilst we would never claim to be God, like Caesar did, we do at least want to decide for ourselves what is right and wrong – we want to be the determiners of that – not some other God – and we want to have ultimate control over our own lives. And we may not think we're the divine emperor, but if we're honest, we rather like the idea of the world revolving around us, in fact, sometimes we even catch ourselves thinking or behaving as if it should.

Now, why do we think like this? Why, in our highly individualistic age do we resent authority figures, and tend to think that no one should be able to tell us what to do or think? Why have we replaced God with ourselves? Why do we think that we're only *truly* human if we get to decide what happens in our lives? Well, there are a number of answers to that, but one reason is that we think that it's only by having *ultimate* control, and deciding for ourselves, that we'll find the inner peace and sense of fulfilment in life that we all long for. That that's the only way that our lives can count, that they'll have meaning. And so it helps keep our fears of meaninglessness at bay. So there's a sense in which our desire to be the one in the palace, the one calling the shots, our hunger for glory if you like, is really driven by our search for deep, inner heart peace and significance.

And yet it's not to people seemingly in control and at the top of the tree that the angel says, 'fear not, I bring you good news of great joy' – it's to the ones who knew they were nothing. It was to shepherds not caesars that they came. And the truth is we'll never know deep inner peace and a certain joy all the time we're trying to be king or queen, all the time we want the glory for ourselves. Instead, all we'll know is a constant striving, and inner, gnawing, hunger. As Jesus' mother Mary sang in that beautiful song we call the Magnificat, God "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their

thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.' (Luke 1:51-53).

You see, ultimately life isn't about you or me at the centre, is it? It's about giving God that rightful place. As the angels sang to the shepherds, "Glory *to God* in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" And Christ has come to save us from our own glory hunger, from our wanting to be God, from our striving to be king, that sin that does so much damage, not just to ourselves, but to those around us, who are also trying to be king.

So whilst Christ came to the lowest – he's come for us all. As the angel said, this is good news of great joy for *all* people – for those who feel they are nothing, and those who think they are something.

You see, maybe at the moment you feel at rock bottom. On the outside, you're as good as anyone else, no one would mistake you for a shepherd! But on the inside, you feel at your lowest. Maybe that's because of some relationship, or work issue, or maybe you just take a look inside and you don't like what you see. Well, it's for you that Christ has come. That as you look to him, and know his love for you, that he would humble himself and come for shepherds and for you, and you put your trust in him, you can know a depth of inner peace and joy you've never experienced.

Or maybe you recognise your proud, Caesar-like attitudes. Maybe you do find yourself looking down on others lower down the food chain. Maybe you recognise your desire to be the one in control, the one on the throne, the one who has the power and the glory, and you recognise that you want that because you think it'll give you the security and peace you long for. Well, Christ has come for you too, because as the angel says to the shepherds in v11, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a *saviour*" the one who will die for us, who will sacrifice himself to save us from our sins. And that's how we'll know true peace – when he – the ultimate king - has the place of power and glory in our lives. Because it's then that we know our sins of pride and self-centredness are forgiven, and that our lives are safe in the hands of the one who really does have control; the One in whom we find true significance.

So, this Christmas, let's follow the shepherds' lead, and go to Bethlehem. In their words, let's see this thing that has happened, that the God of the universe would break into our world, and humble himself to the lowest place to rescue and to lift up people like us. And unlike the innkeeper, let's make room for him. Because it's in him that we will find good news of great joy, for shepherds and Caesars alike.