

Christmas Day 2021

Luke 2:8-20

Well, good morning! And a very merry and joyful Christmas to you, wherever you are worshipping and watching this morning. I don't know what your tradition is regarding presents, but if you have opened them already, I hope you are enjoying your new socks/Lego/computer game/bottle of wine (please mentally delete as applicable, though come to think of it, it might be a little early to be enjoying the wine.....)

And if you haven't opened your gifts yet, may they be as exciting once the wrapper is off as they always appear when they are sitting temptingly under the tree.

So, it's great to be here with you this morning as we worship. But had you been here in St James Church this time last week, you would have encountered a very different form of worship. Messy Church, our worship particularly for children and their families, took over the building, and the place was full of glue dots, sparkly stuff and nativity costumes as we "did Christmas" – creating stars, angels, crowns and the raw material for our online crib service all within the space of an hour and a half.

We used these fabulous nativity figures, which were in the church porch last year, and brought them to life to re-tell the Christmas story. If you haven't seen the final product, it's still available on YouTube – give it a watch. And praise God for our wonderful families who bravely took part. It may not be quite as polished as some, but it is full of life. And probably truer to the mess that is our normal human existence than it would have been had we had time to rehearse..... The only thing I would change if I could, would be that we would have had a real baby Jesus – but unfortunately, he wasn't too well and we had to use a doll as an understudy. Real life mess, as I said.

But whether it's rehearsed to perfection, or a glorious riot of joy and muddle, there is something about the nativity play that is particularly appealing as we traverse these longest nights of the year. The joy. The simplicity. The innocence.

The familiarity
The memories
The safety of a well known tale without any unpleasant surprises – though maybe having 4 magi pushed that a bit for some people.

But there is a bit of a danger here.

The danger that it's a bit too familiar. Too safe.

The danger that it becomes parcelled up as the religious bit of Christmas. That in some way it gives us permission to do all the other stuff that we want to do to fend off the darkness of mid-winter.

That it plays into the whole idea that this is a "magical" time, divorced from reality. A time when the long-held niggles and tetchiness of family life disappear.

A time when it's really ok to buy a bit more, eat bit more, drink a bit more... without any consequences.

A time when we can retell the story, because "it's all harmless stuff", "Christmas is for the children", and who doesn't want a bit of peace and goodwill. Especially when we have indigestion and the kids are bickering.

But.... what if?

What if it's true?

What if God does break into our everyday existence?

What if there really are times and places where the boundaries between heaven and earth become so thin that actual angels spill over into Judean hillsides, and living, breathing, sweating, (and probably swearing) shepherds – big burly men, who wrangle sheep and fear neither man nor beast – when shepherds like this are so awestruck that they are, quite literally, 'terrified'?

And what if it's not limited to the hillsides around Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago?

What if that indescribable wonder that we sometimes sense in the mountains or by the ocean, when we experience the drama of sunrise or lose ourselves in the vastness of the starry sky – what if that is actually a glimpse of God through his Creation?

What if that peace which descends when we walk into a place of prayer is the stillness and solace of the God who in Jesus has defeated pain and death?

What if that spark of life and joy and welcome which bounces off the walls of Messy Church and the Welcome Café and times of praise and worship is because the Holy Spirit is filling the place with the love and welcome of God?

What if the tingling in our midnight spines when we hear "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" is a truth spoken from eternity?

What if the profound mystery of death, or the sense of wonder at the birth of a child, are pointers to a greater reality than that which we can register with our physical senses?

What if... the amazing thing that happened to the shepherds that night wasn't that they encountered the angels, but that they recognised them for what they were - messengers from the one, true and living God?

And that they did something about it.

That they took the risk and went to look

And found that the ancient stories, the prophecies, the promises that they had grown up with, that had been so long in fulfilment that they seemed little more than comforting fireside tales – had actually come to pass.

That they were true.....

And that this changed everything.

And what of us?

What if these, or other, experiences, which touch not only our minds and bodies, but something deeper-

Are not just moments
But 'messages from God'
Invitations
Invitations to follow those shepherds, to take the risk and go and look

Could it really be true?

Because if it is, if the story is true – then it changes everything

For God's story is not about rules
Or rituals
Or church institutions and buildings
It's not about becoming pious and boring and judgemental

God's story is the story of love
The story of love made tangible in Creation
The story of each and every one of us being made in the image of God
Of being, not an accident of atoms, but a known and infinitely precious child of God.
It's the story of God made human to show us what love looks like
The story of God's invitation to truly live life without limits.

"This will be a sign for you," said the angel to the shepherds. "You will find a child, wrapped in bands of cloth, and lying in a manger."

"So they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger."

Not just an ancient tale.

But true.

So, may our senses and souls be open to the times when heaven and earth draw close, and may we, like the shepherds, find the ancient stories to be true.