

Sermon for Sunday December 31st 2023.
10.30 Morning Worship at Christ the King.

It was an ordinary night, a black velvet sky with twinkling stars. A silent one, yet something so extraordinary took place, a Baby was born in a stable to a virgin called Mary, whom Joseph named Jesus as the angel had told him to in a dream.

This ordinary night now lit up by a bright new star with an angel appearing to the lowest of society, these are poor shepherds, in a field where they were watching their flock of sheep, then a heavenly host of angels heralding the good news before going back up into heaven again from whence they came.

So Jesus has now been born but Mary and Joseph they are still trying to get their heads around not only becoming new parents for the first time, but now have a visit from these shepherds. These shepherds, ordinary people of the lowest status in this life, rambling on about an angel appearing to them telling them of a birth of a baby, then a heavenly host of angels appeared, also before returning to heaven. So these shepherds were now so animated now that they decided to come and see this prophesy that was taking place right now as had been foretold in the old testament of Isaiah 53 chapter 5, as it speaks of a servant who will suffer for the sins of others, a Messiah, and that the Lord himself shall send them a sign. This must be the sign.

The shepherds who had never seen an angel before, being told not to be afraid but go to Bethlehem to see this heavenly babe. Then just as they dared to take a peek at this angel a host of them appeared, all singing praises and then altogether returned to heaven. I should think for a moment they were awe struck, afraid to speak and just looked at each other. But then all of a sudden a great urgency came over them, to go to Bethlehem to see this baby that had been born right now. I should imagine they were thinking that this angel had got it wrong - a new born king lying in a manger in a stable. But if the shepherds didn't quite understand the full message given to them, the word manger was something they would recognise. Not the place for a king to be laid down to sleep in but those angels had heralded the good news.

The shepherds must have felt that their sheep would be ok to leave on the hillside, maybe the sight of these angels had filled them with so much awe and hope, that they just knew that they would watch over them whilst they went. The shepherds upon arriving in Bethlehem found the streets all quiet, deserted even, which was also rather puzzling to them; a king had been born, but it seemed they were the first to know. Then they saw the star, a star like no other they had ever seen, so walked towards it and they realised it was above a stable. So they peered in and Joseph beckoned to them to come in. Mary was cradling her baby, but almost at once as they looked upon the face of baby Jesus they fell onto their knees, they knew this child was special.

They felt it inside of them something had changed them, they gave Joseph a lamb for him, all they had, but Joseph accepted it. Joseph and Mary listened to their story, but they knew they were telling them the truth as both of them had encountered angels themselves.

They left the stable just as the morning light was creeping in and they told everyone they met they had seen the Christ child, before once more returning to the fields and the sheep to continue their ordinary lives but with a renewed hope of things to come.

The towns folk must have been like, who do these shepherds think they are, a new born king? They would have known before them, they are the lowest of men, looking after sheep and living the rough life, how would they have been told first? Maybe they were drunk? Yes, that was it - they were drunk. But then why did they come down out of the hills leaving their sheep, they didn't sound drunk, so we better go and see for ourselves.

Mary and Joseph like all new parents would be tired, yet they welcomed people in to see their son, Mary soaking up everything that was said about him, Joseph too, but also feeling he had to protect Mary and his son perhaps at times saying come back later the mother and child are sleeping. But even he must of been in awe that attention their child had brought.

God knew what he was doing by giving us the gift of this salvation given in the form of a baby, Babies get your attention straight away, you can't help but look. Human or animal young, grab your attention, maybe it's the way the young baby looks and reacts to you, the excited puppy, a mischievous kitten, an exploring monkey climbing its first tree or riding on its mother's back, we are programmed to look and love them all. So this baby reached everyone who came to gaze upon his face.

God knew exactly what he was doing as he chose Mary a simple servant girl a very good girl though and a virgin who trusted and believe in God, so she was chosen by him, she said yes to him, and the Holy Spirit came upon her and she bore our saviour Jesus Christ. Joseph was going to leave Mary when he heard she was pregnant, but an angel appeared to him in a dream telling him everything would be ok so he stayed with her. Then the first to hear the good news was poor shepherds.

Such ordinary people, no expensive clothes or a hotel, no midwife in attendance, no crib to lie him in and the first to pay homage a group of smelly shepherds. There right in the beginning is the message that he comes to the ordinary person, he lies down with them in a manger on a ordinary night, and as they look upon his face know of his love.

Now the excitement of all things Christmassy has died down, we probably feel a little "flat" but tonight we know we are on the beginning of a new year coming in.

So how do we find this Christ now? Do we go looking for him? He is still right there, yes he has grown up now, but if we go looking for him we will eventually find him. He is to be found in the bible, in the aid workers, in our prayer life, in our workplace, schools, churches but we like the shepherds have to see the signs and act upon them, if we really want to encounter this Jesus.

This for us is like starting a new year it's a chance to start a new life with Christ Jesus, if we want him to be in our lives then we need to search him out. If he sees you are trying to find him then he will in some way or another reach out to you as well, you just need to look for the signs and like the shepherds act upon it or if you hear his voice calling you. The new year is like saying goodbye to all that has to be left and swallowed up in time of 2023, yes it can be painful, it might be a relief, it might be said that was a good year for you and it can make you fearful of what this new year might bring.

We have never seen Jesus, only in the drawings and the actors who portray him in films. Yet we have learnt about him, we know where he was born and how he died. But we know he still is among us the bible tells us so.

Yes when there is so much trouble in the world, and so much distress on our streets locally, it can feel he has abandoned us, then this is when you should pray, this is when we need to go to church find comfort with other Christians who are also struggling, help each other to keep your faith alive, stand up for Jesus, he is our salvation and he works in ways mysterious to us. Yes we want things now, we want answers today, we were born impatient, we forget that the world hated him first, yet he still took it upon his shoulders to do the will of his father and give us the gift of salvation if we search him out and believe in him.

I ask you this Do you know him?

Let us go into 2024 with that in mind, seek him out, don't worry about what you might be leaving behind or what you might be worried about for this coming year, just look for him in everything you see, listen out for his message. It might come to you through another, talk about what you don't understand, ask him to forgive you when you know you have sinned or forgive someone who has wronged you, but most of all get to know him and receive his salvation.

This man Jesus born before all the things we have now that enables us to keep in touch, know what's going on in the world. Yet Jesus is talked much more about than any other celebrity I can think of, sometimes by people still claiming they are atheists, yet they can quote many a bible passage, from people who have turned away expressing he cannot exist this compassionate God as look at the state the world is in but they are still questioning him, and on our streets, people are still talking about him as they ask you to pray for them, only they don't know how,

or they still feel he won't listen to them as they never go to church. Children are still amazed at the story of his birth when they come here to our Journey to the Stable and later return to hear of his death. Jesus is very much alive however you encounter him and in what way.

So I wish you all a good start on your journey of faith in 2024 and keep in mind he comes to ordinary people in ordinary ways as he did those poor shepherds. It is up to us to share our faith with who ever and encourage them to get to know him as well. The message of salvation is for each and everyone of us, remember that as we live out our ordinary lives.

Amen.