

Week 3 Song of the Angels – Gloria in Excelsis Deo

The *Gloria* can be found in Luke 2, v 14, in the account of the angels appearing to the shepherds (vv 8 – 20). The song of course forms the start of one of the sections of the Communion service.

Shepherds might seem like an odd choice to be given the first news of the birth of a Saviour. They worked in the countryside, and were not held in high regard because the very nature of their job meant they were unable to keep the ceremonial law (the ritual hand-washing and rules and regulations that controlled people's lives). Their responsibilities were foremost full-time with their flocks, and so they were looked down on by the orthodox Jews.

However, there is another possibility that Barclay mentions in his commentary; these may have been the shepherds who looked after sheep for the Temple authorities. The Temple needed a steady supply of lamb for sacrifices, and this might explain the shepherd's proximity to Bethlehem.

Should this be true (and it is only a suggestion) then it would mean that these shepherds, who looked after the sacrificial lambs, were the first to see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

We are used to the idea of the humble surroundings within which Jesus was born, but his birth was announced to the shepherds with quite an angelic fanfare.

At the start of this chapter we are told that Augustus Caesar had sent out his decree that a census should be taken. Augustus, had declared his own father to be divine and therefore considered himself to be "son of god". It was the census that brought Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

And then comes an angel to a group of shepherds announcing that "Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.". Luke notes that the shepherds were not only told that the Saviour was to be born, but given instructions on how to find him – not only in Bethlehem, but in a manger.

We are probably used to singing the words of the Christmas carol "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" and which contains the words, "Peace on the earth, goodwill to men, from heavens all gracious King!" But that is a slight rewording of the angels' song; a review of the last 2000 years of world history might question the reality of "peace on the earth".

Some questions to think about

1 – What does “peace” mean to you?

2 - The angels sang of the peace of God – how does (or perhaps should) that manifest itself in a Christian’s life? In your life?

3 - Angels are rarely seen today, if at all, and yet there are 17 recorded appearances in the New Testament, and over 270 in the whole Bible. Have they stopped coming, or could it be that we don’t see them because we are not looking for them?

4 - The Saviour of the world was born in a town jam-packed with people who were there for the census, and totally unaware of what was really happening amongst them. What do you think of God’s choice of visitors?

5 – If you were one of the shepherds standing by the manger, how easy would you find it to see within that vulnerable baby, in a borrowed manger, the promised Saviour of the world?

6 – In Luke’s Gospel narrative it is the angels who are God’s “signposts” – for the role of John, the choice of Mary, and the location and appearance of the Messiah. What signposts does God use for you? And how easy do you find it to see (or hear) them?

7 - What is the significance of such a humble and potentially unclean place to use for the entrance of God’s Son into the world?

8 - The angel brought the shepherds ‘good news’, two words which are the translation of the Anglo-Saxon word Godspell, or ‘Gospel’ as we have it now. At the start of Romans, Paul introduces himself as ‘Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God’. How effective are our Churches in proclaiming this ‘good news’ and is there more we could do (or do differently)?

9 - Composers throughout the ages have tried to recreate the ‘angelic voices’ in their choral works. When you listen to works such as Handel’s Messiah or J.S. Bach’s Christmas Oratorio, which tells the entire Christmas story from the Birth right through the arrival and adoration of the Magi, can those beautiful harmonies speak to you apart from the words themselves?

10 – The shepherds left their flocks to find the Messiah spoken of by the angels. As you journey through Advent to the manger of Christmas Day once more, does it still retain its excitement and mystery? What has changed between your childhood experience and today?