

Carol Service 2015: Luke 2:8-20 – ‘Surprises’

Wonder what your greatest surprise is?

- Amazing gift – (e.g. wedding present from academic friend – lab box/crystal lamp and poem)
- Husband or wife proposed
- Not queueing at Post Office

Word ‘surprise’ not one we use when comes to nativity. We *know* the story. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a *good* story, and we like to hear it re-told. Same readings, same characters – angel, virgin, shepherds in tea towels, wise men on camels. Occasionally attempt to spice it up – church member telling me about seeing their grandson’s nativity ‘Christmas with the aliens’ – go figure.

What’s new? Actually story is full of surprises. Miss them because not looking anymore. Like the house keys we’ve lost somewhere near the settee, or like the familiar journey to work or school we’ve done 300 times – we’re looking but we’re not seeing.

Let’s go back to Luke’s account of Jesus birth in ch2 (John read) – notice 3 great surprises:

Shepherds – when God appears on earth, who does he choose to announce the arrival to? The piazzas of ancient Rome, capital of the known world? The great gathering places of Athens? Estimated 30,000 pilgrims attending Jerusalem for Passover in 1st century AD? The rich and famous? The great and the good? The religious elite? Not a bit of it. He chose the scruffy ragtag bunch of toughs on the hillside. Nowadays we think of shepherds as noble pastoralists wearing (you guessed it) teatowels – but in reality they were more like nightclub bouncers. Imagine today a bunch of large men outside church in black bomber jackets: that’s who God chose to tell.

Here in UK we think of Christianity as a respectable middle-class thing. CofE is ‘Tory party at prayer’. Not so in other parts of the world. In India, 60% of the Christians in that nation are dalits, ‘untouchables’, for whom the message that God is for everyone sounds like exactly what we call it: good news.

Funny that we think of Christian faith as so middle class when we have a working class Saviour. Jesus was a carpenter, and at his birth the angels appear to the local toughs. When God breaks into our world, He comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable. And everyone gets to play a part in it – don’t need A-levels or degrees, or a nice house and a good job. Like shepherds, just need to look, and listen, and believe.

(1st – Shepherds) 2nd surprise: v11, message of angels: **‘Saviour born’** – but who born to? Fill in the blank – a Saviour has been born to..... if it was me, I would have said ‘the world’ (repeat), or Israel (repeat) – they were God’s people, here was the Messiah. But no: very personal – ‘to you’ (repeat).

We live in a vast world, full of billions of people. Back then, world was if anything even larger as travel was so slow. And the message of Jesus *is* for the whole world – Christian in every country. But where does it start? – Saviour born to you.

Christmas is a great time of year – last festival left where a good proportion of our country gathers to celebrate, and the churches are full. Millions of people will be singing carols this evening around the country, millions will hear these familiar readings. But it's sometimes easy in the corporate nature of our celebrations to forget the personal challenge in the message. Yet here it is, right in the middle of the story – listen up, shepherds, the Saviour is for you. Yes, you.

And for you plumbers and landscape gardeners and beauty therapists and accountants and warehousemen and health & safety reps and doctors and retail assistants and marketing executives and full-time homemakers and retired people and students and toddlers and athletes yes even for bankers. A Saviour has been born to you.

Must ask you gently – is he your Saviour? God only has children – not grandchildren, or in-laws or second cousins once-removed. In the end it's not enough to be part of the crowd. Bethlehem was a small place – but most of its inhabitants missed the main event. They missed the great surprise.

So shepherds, Saviour born to you, and finally (you guessed it, another 's') '**sign**' (v12). The angels gave the shepherds a sign that God was doing something. What was it? As if angelic chorus not enough! Maybe a great meteor shower? Or the town of Bethlehem ascending into the sky? Or all its inhabitants turning luminous yellow? What could it be?

'Find a baby lying in a manger.' (PAUSE) Is that it? A baby? Where's the surprise?

The surprise is where the baby lies. In an animal's feeding trough. Nowadays made to look quite nice, packed with straw. Probably a lump of stone with bit hollowed out of top to have a pool of stagnant-ish water. This is where God himself, the king of the universe first sleeps? It's too bizarre to be true! (PAUSE) Or so bizarre it must be true.

The word sign is important. A sign *points* to something. What on earth does this sign point to? Well, back to where we started: God is turning the world upside-down. When God breaks in, he doesn't come to a palace and servants and feather mattresses and inherited privilege. He plants himself in the womb of a teenage peasant girl, engaged to a carpenter. He's born in a place where they keep animals and laid on a stone feeding basin, visited by the local bouncers.

And from this point on, everything will be different. (PAUSE)

So take a fresh look at the story this Christmas, it's full of surprises. Don't miss it. Most people do. To finish, I'm going to read the first of 2 extracts from Max Lucado (2nd at Midnight communion). From book 'God came near', extracts from ch1: The Arrival.