

New Year's Day 2023 – Luke 2:15-20 'Into Our World'

Imagine if the Christmas story happened in your town... it's a good question to ask isn't it? Would you realise? Or would it happen under the radar, so to speak – a history-changing event that nobody knew about, like the amazing work at Bletchley Park that happened right on our doorstep but in secrecy.

As I mentioned on Christmas Day, **the big difference between the Shepherds and the Magi is that Jesus came right into their world – their town, their home, their community.** [What we've just imagined happening in Milton Keynes was the shepherds' reality.](#) We tend to think that the Magi took all the risks, and certainly their journey across the desert and their audience with Herod required bravery; but when news of the new-born king became dangerous, and Herod sent in the troops, perhaps the shepherds – the very first to see the new-born king – were in even more danger. After all, they'd told everyone they knew: would any of those people give their identities up?

Today we celebrate the start of the New Year – perhaps many of us are not feeling in a particularly celebratory mood, we're in difficult times at present. But a new year it is, and it's often **a chance to press the pause button and reflect on where we are:** how last year was for us, and what we hope this year will be.

And I think it's helpful that the Christmas Season actually extends into the New Year. We can easily forget that Christmas is not the end of a season – though the lengthy preparations that many people go through might make it feel like that – but rather the beginning. It begs us to ask the question: what now? What next? What will this good news mean for you in the coming year?

In that sense, the Christmas story always happens in *our* town, where *we* live, because **its message is good news for everyone, and invites all of us to make a response.** And in our passage today we can learn from both Mary and the Shepherds, whose response to the birth of Jesus has so much to tell us.

First, we see gratitude. The shepherds glorify and praise God (v20), but Mary goes further: 'she treasures up all these things' (v19). Here we see gratitude expressed both externally and internally – which reminds us of the value of both. As I shared in detail a few weeks ago, many studies have shown how gratitude is good for us. It can be hard to be thankful when life is hard – but even in the worst of times there is usually something to give thanks for. I have a friend who wakes up and gives thanks for ten things each morning: it sets the rest of the day's challenges in perspective. Is that something you could benefit from this year?

And there are times, too, when we need to do what Mary did – to go beyond praise to a purposeful focus on something we can treasure. What can you treasure today? Take a few moments today to think of something and spend time just *treasuring* it. It might be a favourite scripture, or a memory of an answered prayer, or something about Jesus that you really love. Enjoy that moment: treasure it in your heart. May 2023 be a year when we learn to keep *treasuring*, whatever life throws at us.

Second, Mary pondered. This takes treasuring a step further again. What do things *mean*? What have I learnt? It was the Greek philosopher Socrates who said that the unreflected life is not worth living, by which he means that, if all our life experiences don't make us wiser, don't lead us into more fruitful living, then what did we have those experiences for? Mary's pondering no doubt prepared her for what her Son would grow up to be. Take some time this week to ponder what you learnt from last year. How did you grow? What experiences in your life will bear fruit in the year to come? Ponder in your heart, before the Lord.

Finally, lest this all becomes a bit too introspective, what I love about the shepherds is that they are naturally people of action. When they see the angels, they act immediately – they hurry off (v16); even at night, even with their sheep left untended. And then, **after they had seen Jesus, they 'spread the word' (v17).** Good news is designed to be shared – and we have the best news of all: a Saviour has been born – Christ the Lord!

How will you spread the word this year? Not all of us are natural evangelists – but we can *all* share a story, we can all invite someone to something, we can all pray. I sense that there is a greater hunger in our society for spiritual things than for many years: people are no longer inoculated against faith by a culture which takes it for granted. When people hear the story now, in most cases they are hearing it for the first time, they are learning new things. What we're offering is not dull religion, but a life-changing relationship, a life of purpose and hope. People are hungry for that, just like we are.

The angels finished their words to the shepherds by declaring: 'on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests'. This phrase doesn't have an ending, a use-by date. Today, 2,000 years later, we are *still* those on whom God's favour rests. And our task is to keep treasuring, keep pondering, and keep spreading the word. **We start 2023 as we ended 2022 – with good news!** And may that good news be all that we need in this coming year. Amen.