

Title: The Gathering (Part 3 of 3) – Luke 2v8-20

Purpose: To consider our own response to the good news of Jesus' entrance into our world of sin and judgment.

INTRODUCTION

Well it's Christmas morning and, as we have an English Literature University student amongst us, I have spared no expense in the Christmas Season messages as a trilogy and today we have part 3 – what I am calling the Gathering.

Each of the messages have been to do with things coming together – Part 1 was about events that came together in the life of Zechariah and then Part 2 was people that came together in a family reunion – Elizabeth and Mary.

Today we are looking at the gathering of various people at the birth of the Christ child there in that town of Bethlehem.

The Setting

Now the setting of this story is very precious and I am not immediately thinking of the rather un-cute stable where Jesus was born. No I'm thinking of this place: **Bethlehem**.

In all of God's redemptive drama that we have here in the Bible, Old and New Testament, **nothing is as random as you might initially assume**. In so many ways **GOD SIMPLY DOESN'T DO "RANDOM"**.

Bethlehem was a stone's throw from Jerusalem where Jesus life we one day be ended on a Roman cross. However, **Bethlehem**, when you translate its name, means "**House**" (that is '**Beth**') and then '**Lehem**' which means "**Bread**" – so **Bethlehem** is: "**The House of Bread**" – and so fitting that Jesus – who would later describe himself as that "**Ultimate Manna**", that "**Bread come down from heaven**", would be born here in the "**House of Bread**".

Again, it is ***not* random at a prophetic level either**.

Back in one of the Minor Prophets – that book of **Micah and Chapter 5** we read:

"But you, **Bethlehem Ephrathah**, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Now for the remainder of our brief time I want to consider 1 message and 4 responses AND I don't want to spend very long on any of them.

The Message

So first of all **THE MESSAGE** and it is important if we are going to sensibly consider **responses**, and what they maybe have to say to us, **that we know what they were responses to**.

So then the message of Christmas is this:

Luke chapter 2 verses 10&11 – spells it out very economically in a nutshell:

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in

the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

Now clearly I could take a long time unwrapping this piece by piece but I don't really want to do that – so let me take more of a **“bullet-point approach”** and just take each piece and bring out its implication in a **“punchy paragraph”**.

So then the angel's message:

- **“Do not be afraid”** – clearly, when people get visited by an angelic being, the very normal, natural and to-be-expected response is one of fear and trembling. If you find that hard to accept, that could just be because you have not had a real angel turn up at the end of your bed.

However that said, I do feel there is a double reason why they should not fear: 1) one – because the angel does not have any harmful intentions, so we have a benign and not a malign angel, 2) and also because the message the angel brings is one that truly should dispel all fear and replace it with incredible relief to all mankind because their sins are dealt with and the Sword of Damocles that was hanging by a single and slender horse's hair had been taken down.

- **“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people”** – good news here is that word in the Greek language from which we get a variety of our English words, for example: **‘evangelise’** (this is the verb form) this is literally **“to good news”** **“to gossip the gospel”** **OR** (thinking of the noun form) we have **‘evangel’** **OR** (thinking of the adjective) **‘evangelical’** someone or something chiefly shaped or holding as very central and primary the good news.

I suppose it is worth saying that this is ***NOT*** framed as **GOOD ADVICE** – very frequently people take the evangel, the gospel as **GOOD ADVISE** and say that is what Christianity is all about – **“How to live a good life”**.

In the good news we discover that something has taken place or is taking place that has remarkable implications for us. And we have to choose whether we receive it or whether we don't.

The response that the angel ties to the **GOOD NEWS** is **GREAT JOY** and one aspect of that **GREATNESS** is the fact that the good news is **UNIVERSAL** – it is for all people, no-one is de facto excluded.

- **“A saviour has been born to you”** it goes on. This helps us to look inside the heart of this evangel, this good news. It makes it abundantly clear that the good news is ***not*** to do with **DECENCY**, our living a basically upright life. No this speaks about salvation and that means that someone is, in and of themselves, **LOST**. It means that without outside intervention, they are going to lose their lives.

If you meet a true Christian, at some point they will talk to you about the issue of **SALVATION**. The gospel, at its very centre is a life and death thing.

- **“He is Christ the Lord”** – what this tells us is where this salvation comes from. Put simply this salvation is **“OUT OF THIS WORLD”** – the Saviour is ***not*** simply one of us. He is Christ – that means he is the **“anointed one”** and also he is the Lord, and that means that he is **DIVINE**.

This is a salvation that comes down from above. You have probably heard people talk about Christians being **“born-again”** people – well that is true, it is a phrase Jesus used – however that phrase can also indicate that we are **“born from above”** and that is an important reality of the gospel – it is procured by a Saviour whose origin is

from outside of this vale of tears.

Amazing how much the lead angel pack into a short GOSPEL PRESENTATION.

Let's see our 4 responses and take opportunity to maybe match ourselves OR *not*:

RESPONSE GROUP #1 – are the Shepherds

This is a nice touch really that God should chose this particular group to be the first public recipients of the gospel message.

You see Shepherds were, due to their trade, rather despised and looked down up. They were unable to keep the ceremonial requirements of the law, they could not maintain the meticulous hand-washings, rules and regulations and so they were rather downtrodden at a spiritual level.

(Worth noting that the first public recipients of the great Resurrection news was also, in the wisdom of God, given to another downtrodden class – and that was to the women.)

Another interesting touch with this selected group of people was the fact that they would be the ones who had charge of the flocks of sheep that would form the supply chain for those sheep that would morning and evening all through the year be sacrificed in the Temple just a few miles up the road at Jerusalem.

And so it was to them that God gave, as it were, the initial care of his Son who John the Baptist would later call: “**The LAMB OF GOD who takes away the sin of the world.**”

Q. Now what was their response?

Well, they take the message very seriously and they rush into Bethlehem to see what they have been told about.

It is a reaction of **faith** and **belief**, *not* one of **scepticism** or one of “**detached disinterest**”.

Verse 16&17 “So they **hurried off** and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, **they spread the word** concerning what had been told them about this child,...”

It is worth saying that the message affected them sufficiently that they did not just act as RECEPTORS of the GOOD NEWS but also as REFLECTORS as well.

They passed on the good news to others that would listen.

Ok – that is RESPONSE #1 – now:

RESPONSE GROUP #2 –the Angels

It is easy in this story to think that there was just a solitary angel – especially since many of the other nativity stories do just involved one named angel called Gabriel.

But here the story is in 2 parts and once a single angel has delivered the gospel message we then have a whole choir or company of angels responding.

Once again this is perhaps more fitting than might be noticed just on a surface reading.

This is what **William Barclay** says (he is a helpful commentator particularly when it comes to certain historical details):

“...when a boy was born, the local musicians congregated at the house to greet him with simple music. Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem and therefore that ceremony could not be carried out.

It is a lovely thought that the **MINSTRELSY of heaven took the place of the MINSTRELSY of earth**, and angels sang the songs for Jesus that the earthly singers could not sing.”

Q. So what was the angels response?

Verses 13&14 tell us: “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.”

In a word it was PRAISE.

In the Latin Bible version, the Vulgate, what they sang started: “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” – “Glory to God in the highest” and this brief response of the angels became a staple part of most preaching church services for the past 1,500 especially within the Roman Catholic tradition.

Usually there would be the Kyrie Eleison – Lord have mercy and then the Gloria – Glory to God in highest and peace to men on whom his favour rests.

It is a dual edged response – in regards to God – He deserves all the Glory for the Gospel – in regards to mankind, this spells peace to them because God has chosen to dispense his grace and favour upon them.

RESPONSE GROUP #3 – The Bystanders

Here we draw from Verse 18 **“and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.”**

This reaction of amazement, and you could also translate that as WONDER or MARVEL or ASTONISHMENT – is a reaction that does not necessarily go one way or the other.

It is essentially an emotional response, *NOT* really a considered response.

It is rather like when you’re driving along the motorway in the middle lane, entirely minding your own business at around 70 mph and then before you even had time to notice, a motorbike ROARED past you going 130 mph!!

Your first reaction, your gut reaction is typically one of AMAZEMENT – Wow you say, “that guy must be doing at least 130 mph – look at him go!!”.

It is only afterwards that you may give a considered response – which might well be “that guy is just asking to be killed.” “What was he playing at! Is he trying to get innocent people into trouble, what if I’d moved out – I would never have seen him coming!!”.

Ok one last response.

RESPONSE GROUP (or PERSON) #4 – The Mother of Jesus

Verse 19 tells us how she reacts to everything that has broken loose since she gave birth.

“But Mary **treasured up all these things** and **pondered them in her heart.**”

As you can see there is BOTH pondering & treasuring:

- PONDERING – she is weighing up, thinking through, figuring out – the meaning of the events, the things that the shepherd would have conveyed to her.

She would have been thinking over those amazing words spoken by the lead angel:

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

- TREASURING – she is storing them away. She is memorizing them and rehearsing them to herself so that she will never one day wake up and say to herself: Q. So what exactly was it that the shepherds told me about the gospel?

In fact this is not the only time that we learn that Mary was treasuring things.

Years later on when Jesus had been to Jerusalem perhaps for his Bar Mitzvah and had been left behind –Jesus said to his parents:

“Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” it goes on “But **his mother treasured all these things in her heart.**”

Mary’s response is one of THINKING THINGS THROUGH and ALLOWING THEM TO HAVE THAT CHIEF PLACE OF VALUE i.e. in our very hearts.

CONCLUSION

So then – Q. What is the conclusion of the matter?

The conclusion of the matter this morning is, of course, YOUR REACTION, YOUR RESPONSE.

Perhaps you might fit some of the following:

- a case of “**same old same old**” – a reaction of “I’ve heard it all before, there’s nothing new – it is a tired story that does not touch me – I am immune to it having any effect on me.”
- it might be: “**this is intellectually rather patronising frankly**” – people, Christians, want us to dumb down our intelligence and buy a story about a virgin with a child and bright shining stars and “We three kings from Orient are!!”
- alternatively: you would like to give this story and others like it, some welly!! To give some free rein to your ire and anger – you feel these things are somehow forced down your throats once or twice a year.
- going back in the other direction - some would be more open, more reflective and would be aware that if you dismiss very well documented and historically attested records, then for you to keep your integrity you should do the same with other history of the same period which are less well documented, preserved and attested.

Let me encourage you to take a fresh & open look at things.

You can take your starting point from the people that were amazed.

Then go on from there to that of the Shepherds and make a move – to go and investigate it for yourselves and then perhaps you too will end up as the Shepherds did on that occasion and I will leave you with the closing verse of the passage as a fitting conclusion:

Verse 20 “The shepherds returned, **glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen**, which were just as they had been told. “

Well, may God bless us with His exquisite richness this Christmas Day – in Jesus Name

AMEN