

Reading: Luke 2:1-20

Theme: Contrasts to note 🎵🎵🎵🎵

As we have looked at these early chapters in Luke, we have seen the consequences for Mary and all that it meant to her. Last week we looked at events around the Nativity. We saw Mary was no one special, but was chosen by God to bear the Saviour of the world - her Saviour and ours. This morning all I want to do is to contrast two of the groups Luke included in the Nativity account - the shepherds and the angels.

The birth of the Lord Jesus went seemingly unnoticed - even by people around in Bethlehem let alone the world. It is staggering that one of the most momentous events in world history came, yet went unnoticed and there was little excitement on earth. In contrast to this, it seems there was vast excitement in heaven. 1 Peter 1:12b tells us that angels desire to look into and wonder at the things of salvation. They were not going to let this great event of "*the Word made flesh*" go unnoticed or unheralded. There would be a royal announcement of His birth - not made in a palace, or in Jerusalem, or to any religious dignity, but to roughneck shepherds. The angels would tell of the One who is the Good Shepherd to these shepherds out on the hills around Bethlehem. I want us to look briefly at the angels and shepherds by contrasting them to see what we can learn of them for our lives today:

1. The Contrast of Their States.

We will look at what they were in and of themselves. First thing to note is that angels are like the shepherds - both are created beings. There was a time when they were not, but in eternity they were created and are eternal beings. They are eternal beings, so too is the spiritual nature of men and women, boys and girls – our souls. Angels are pure and sinless. There is no trace of wrong in them. We cannot begin to realise their purity, for our minds and

beings are naturally at home in the polluted atmosphere of sin in this world in which we live, but they are pure and holy, they can live before God's glorious, radiant holiness, yes they are awed, even terrified by it, but are not destroyed by it.

Realise angels are much more powerful than any man. An angel went through the army of the Syrians and in one night put to death 185,000 men! Whether we realise it or not angels are mighty, powerful beings, yet they are only (*if I can say that*) servants of God. The God they willingly serve is almighty, all-powerful and they delight in Him as the Creator and their Lord. Their aim, desire and pleasure are to serve and please Him. The fact that angels appeared here to the shepherds shows us they were acting upon God's command, desire and decree - I wonder if Hebrews 1:6 refers to this "*when God brings His firstborn into the world, He says, 'Let all God's angels worship Him.'*"

So, if that is the angels, what then were the shepherds like? The most obvious thing is that they were just men; men who were getting on with the job of shepherding. David came from Bethlehem and he was a shepherd. The area was one of agriculture, especially that of flocks, so was not an uncommon thing for someone to be a shepherd in that area. I need to remind you of what I said last week - shepherds were a despised class of people. They were not considered "*good Jews*" as the very nature of the work made it difficult for them to observe and keep all the laws and rituals of the Mosaic law or the many man-made regulations added to the Mosaic law. They were tarred with the brush of confusing '*thine*' with '*mine*' regarding property and possessions as they moved around the countryside! They were looked down upon as a class, as being dodgy and also excluded from giving testimony and witness in courts as their unreliability had become proverbial!

This general reputation did not mean all were like that, as there may very well have been many fine men among them, who could do nothing else but be shepherds and yet were nevertheless godly men. We do not know what these particular men were like exactly, but we know they were mortal, sinful men, who by nature were not inclined towards God. As Jews they would have learned the OT and being from the Bethlehem area, they were aware of David and also the promises of the Saviour coming from David's line.

It is clear the 2 groups were in stark contrast - each being what the other was not - the angels being pure and holy, mighty, admirable and eternal; while the shepherds were naturally sinners, polluted, despised and mortal. Yet the two groups came into contact as they met on that night, when the good news of the Saviour was willingly brought to the shepherds by the angels.

2. The Contrast of Their Situations.

On that first Christmas night the situations of the two groups could not have been much different. The angels were in heaven, before the throne of God, basking and delighting in His glorious presence, they were outside of time, with the company of the OT redeemed already in heaven, some probably away serving those who are the heirs of salvation, but for the rest their attention was on the birth of God incarnate.

The shepherds - well it was another night to them. They were looking after their flocks - probably moved them off the hillsides, into the communal pens where there was protection against wild animals, the elements, perhaps even a fire going. Some may have been asleep getting ready for their turn on watch. Yet the ordinary night would dramatically change and do so in an instant...

Suddenly an angel, just one angel appears to them. The command in heaven had been given to go - an angel is made visible to the shepherds and the glory of the Lord shone around. It is as if a door was opened and the glorious light from heaven flooded through around on the hillside. While the angel was not afraid to go and greet the shepherds, yet the sight of such a glorious, majestic holy angel cause them to be terrified. This angel was a servant of the God of grace and comfort and so thankfully the angel showed that and calms their fear *“Do not be afraid. I bring you news of great joy...”* the angel then proceeded to tell them the good news of the Saviour’s birth. God had time for these shepherds that others despised. I think that is amazing.

I think it is wonderful that God ever had time for anyone of us, let alone came to earth as our Saviour. None of us here have the attention of the world’s media, none of us are immune from sin or fears. Yet the Lord knows us. He cares for us and He knows our state and situation of life. He meets us where we are, in ways we will not expect - to bring us comfort, remove our fears and bring us hope. This is all founded on the Lord Jesus and Him alone.

Ordinarily many of us would never have met, let alone be friends and enjoy one another’s company. Yet we have been brought together in the church and is no accident, but on purpose - we can see God’s hand in it. God does work in strange ways, yet His ways are right and past finding out. God worked there that first Christmas - the shepherds and angels were brought together.

3. The Contrast of Their Knowledge.

On the one hand we have the angels who knew exactly the events of the night, the wondrous events of the past 9 months, the past year and half - Zechariah, Mary and later Joseph told by angels of the children – 1st John the Baptist and later Jesus. The angels knew

of the events there in Bethlehem, but they knew more than that. They knew and wondered at the one born and laid in a manger.

From the first moment of their creation in eternity before time, angels beheld the 2nd person of the godhead in His glorious majesty, beauty and holiness. Isaiah in his book records seeing the Lord high and lifted up, His glory filling the temple, the angels hiding their faces from His glorious Being, then worshipping and adoring Him. Yet John tells us that when Isaiah saw this *“Isaiah said this because He saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about Him.”* (John 12:41 NIV). The One the angels adored and worshipped as Isaiah saw, was none other than the same One who lay helpless, dependent and laying a manger! To the angels it was unbelievable that this one should enter into the human race in such a way - humble, unrecognised. Carols and songs pick up on this:

“God with man is now residing, yonder shines the Infant light”
James Montgomery

“Emptied of His Majesty, of His dazzling glory shorn, Beings source begins to be, and God Himself is born” Charles Wesley

“Veiled in flesh the godhead see. Hail the Incarnate Deity”
Charles Wesley

“Meekness and majesty, manhood and Deity, in perfect harmony, the Man who is God. Lord of eternity dwells in humanity...”
Graham Kendrick

For the angels it was a wonder and they burst into adoring praise
“Glory to God in the highest”.

The shepherds are ignorant of the events, ignorant of the true glory of the One born - the Saviour, Christ the Lord, but they are quick to learn and quick to believe! Their ignorance, lack of culture and education were no bar to their hearing the good news of great joy and believing it. They were not told to go, although it is implied in v12 *“You will find a baby...”* Yet you would not have stopped

them and off they went. Whether anyone stayed behind I don't know - we are not told! They went and v15 tells us they attributed what they had been told *to the Lord*. What they had heard was not just an angel's voice or voices, but they recognise the Lord speaking to them through the angels as the good news was proclaimed. They believed and went to see.

As we read God's word as individuals, or in the preaching here, we are not just to hear a writer or a man, but God. We are to hear what God is saying to us as we read His word and through the preaching - as it agrees with His word. We may not be the greatest intellect, have limited knowledge and ability, or we may be the opposite to that, but we all need to read and hear God's word about this Saviour, to believe in Jesus as our own Saviour.

4. The Contrast of Their Salvation.

I know it sounds obvious, but we celebrate that the Lord Jesus took to Himself humanity, He was of the seed of Abraham, of David's line, born in David's town. He became a true man. We are told in Hebrews 2:9a *"But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels"*. Jesus didn't humble Himself and come as an angel – humbling as that would be, but became a real human being. He had not come to rescue and save angels, for they are pure and spotless. Yet those angels were bursting with excitement and praise because of what was going on. They were to receive no direct personal benefits from Jesus' birth, life or death.

Yet their words tell of the need of the shepherds, the need of us all *"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 the Christ the Lord."* We all need, the shepherds needed to be rescued, to be saved. We needed a Saviour. Jesus is ***The Saviour***. He is the anointed One of God - and He is Lord, which uses the

Greek equivalent word as is used for Jehovah, Yahweh in OT. He is God - in all His fullness, this One who was laid in a manger, wrapped in cloths, “swaddling clothes” is God in human form, the One set aside to be the Saviour of all who trust in Him.

We noted last week, the shepherds went and found Him - taking time and effort, but found Him - just as they’d been told. They may have learned more about Him by asking questions of Mary and Joseph and also told Mary and Joseph about their encounter with the angels up in the hills. After they had found Him for themselves, they went and told others with excitement and joy

What about us? Have we as individuals found the Lord Jesus? I’m not asking if you have been brought up in a Christian home, if you come to church regularly - if you have then you’ve heard of Jesus through the Bible, in books, in Sunday school, in the services, but have *you* sought Him and found Him for *yourself* as your own Saviour. There is no such thing as a 2nd hand saving faith. God only has children and no grandchildren - this means that we have to trust the Lord Jesus *as our own* Saviour for us to become a child of God. The Bible says in Isaiah 55:6 “*Seek the LORD while He may be found; call on Him while He is near.*” Thankfully God is still in the business of saving people, whether they are young or old, good or bad, rich or poor, religious or not religious at all. Many of us here have found Him and we desire to tell others of Him - as we learn of Him and know more of His love and care for us, surely then we will want to tell people about Him and where they can find Him. It doesn’t mean we’ll be able to do so in grand public ways, but we in our lives will desire to tell of and to show of Him and His love that lifted us.

5. The Contrast of Their Worship.

After the angel told the shepherds, then there was a great company of the heavenly host - literally "*the heavenly army*" who praised God. As I said last week that must have been something to hear - an army who proclaimed peace and glorify God. Creation is to God's glory; salvation deserves "*Glory to God in the highest*". The angels adore and worship God for His grace and mercy shown to men on whom His favour rests. This mercy would bring peace - peace between God and man, between man and God, to the heart and mind of sinful men and women; peace within each one's heart and mind; peace between enemies as they are reconciled to God. For such a Saviour, for such a plan of salvation, for such a wonderful way of bringing it about in history, there is only one thing the angels can do - praise God "*Glory to God in the highest*".

The shepherds, after their fear and wonder, they went, found all things exactly as they had been told and we read in v20 "*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen*". While the angels could praise God in this way, they could not praise Him for providing a Saviour **for them** as they were outside the scope of salvation - they did not need it. The shepherds did and they praised Him who could be their Saviour. What about us this Christmas? Yes, there may be many things we can give thanks for, but can we give thanks and praise God for His unspeakable gift - the Lord Jesus and the salvation He has provided for us? We are to do so from our innermost being, for without Him there is no Christmas joy. We should be those who glorify and praise God for such a Saviour who can be ours for time and eternity.