

### **“Gracious Glorious Gift” – Lk 2:1-14 – Dec 23/12**

Well, here we are, only two sleeps away from Christmas Day. The city is brightly light with festive colours; our homes and our church are festooned with various decorations; the fridges and pantries are groaning with turkeys and hams and cookies and goodies; the Christmas hampers have been assembled and delivered – we are almost ready for the Big Day. The stores are filled with Santa’s helpers; the television commercials feature reindeer and stockings; Christmas cheer is evident all over the place. For weeks now we have experienced the anticipation as we have traveled through Advent, and journeyed through the buildup to this happy and blessed event.

And so I think it is an excellent time to pause, to take a deep breath, and to reflect on what’s at the heart of all of the celebrations – to contemplate “the reason for the season” as some faithful express it. We have become so immersed into the cultural celebration of Christmas and inured by Christmas Card pictures of this event that I think we sometimes miss the picture as it is presented in the gospels. When we think of Christmas what usually comes to mind are lovely pastoral pictures of a hillside, after-dusk starlit skies, sheep softly grazing or lying still, shepherds standing around a little fire, often camels and wise men and a star, light spilling out from the window or door of a stable in the village down in the valley. I’m sure we can all remember cards with those lovely pictures – and we’re eagerly anticipating the children from the Sunday School presenting us with their dynamic version of this tableau a little later in today’s service.

However, in the midst of all the glitter that surrounds us, it is good for us to remember that the gospel paints a simpler yet more spectacular picture; a picture that has all the rough edges of real life, rough edges that provide a sharper and clearer insight into the glorious magnificence of this grace-filled event. Sometimes we need to strip away all the soft niceness of the Christmas card image of that night, and see it the way the gospel presents it.

I have to admit that when I read and reread the familiar passage from Luke that tells of the meeting of the angel and the shepherds, I had a really good chuckle. I know that may sound irreverent and even inappropriate, but I assure you I understand at least as well as anyone how serious and significant this incident was, but there is still a wondrous Monty Python kind of delicious humour about the way it happened.

So, pause with me for half a moment and picture the scene the way the gospel presents it. Shepherds, living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Shepherds – now recall that these were not the sweet young men we normally think of when we imagine favourite grandsons. These were real people, living a rough lifestyle. Rough, tough people accustomed to a hard and difficult life looking after sheep. They were not a pleasant gang of people but more like the kind of crowd you’d cross the street to avoid, especially at night.

Suddenly, an angel of the Lord stands in front of these tough shepherds. Now we don’t get much in the way of pictures in the gospels about angels, but from the description “the glory of the Lord shone around them” I think we can safely imagine that angels look pretty clean, pretty pure, well, sort of ‘pretty’, ‘beautiful’, ‘handsome’ if you prefer. This angel provides quite the opposite image of the shepherds, and the image of these two coming together was what caused me to chuckle. Here’s this rough, tough crowd of shepherds facing a perfect, glowing angel. Think of a male ballet dancer, costumed in a tutu, suddenly appearing in the middle of a bunch of coal miners coming off shift. Yes, we can understand there would be plenty of fear and trembling, except here the fear and the trembling was all felt by the shepherds. “They were terrified”, the gospel tells us. I guess so!

Recognizing that fear and terror is important. We cannot, we must not, let all the gentle Christmas cards wash away our appreciation for just how terrified these poor shepherds were – because if we picture them as merely smiling and nodding through this event with blissful looks on their faces, we completely miss the stunning shock they felt at being in the presence of a messenger sent directly from God. It's that sense of being overwhelmed by being in the presence of the Holy that moves this story beyond amusing comedy skits; it is the power of that fear and trembling that propels us beyond sweet Christmas cards and pushes us into the life-giving reality of the Gospels. Can you imagine the fear, the overwhelming sense of terror at not just this one messenger from heaven appearing suddenly, the hillside lit up with an eerie glow, a few short words about a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord, but then all heaven opening up, a whole host of angels praising God. Truly that was a moment of glory at the beginning of the life of Jesus.

There was the glory – and yet the grace of the moment occurs for me right after the angel chorus. “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven ...” That image alone is a thousand pictures painted with merely a few words! Imagine sudden crashing silence, with the echoes of the angel chorus ringing only in their heads. That moment when the darkness of night returned to cloak the hills, and the shepherds stood stunned by the whole event. That was the moment when they could have reassured each other that they had dreamed it all, that it must have been some bad olives they had for supper. But in a moment of true glory they didn't. These rough, tough sunburned and scarred individuals instead said to each other, most likely in that lovely laconic way that farm people do, “let's go take a look”, and they did. In response to the angel's message “You will find a child ...” they went down to Bethlehem, they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger, and they told everyone what had happened to them.

That in itself is a picture of grace and glory, too – a group of rough, tough men relating an incredible tale, and yet providing the credibility through their very being in the presence of the Holy Child whose birth had been announced to them. All who heard them were amazed at what the shepherds told them – I guess so! It's an amazing story, made even more amazing by the incongruity of these shepherds themselves becoming angels of sorts, messengers bringing the news of a heavenly heralding of this good news, the birth of a Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord, promised so long before.

What did it mean? What could it mean? The shepherds, and the world, including Mary, would have to wait another three decades before it would all come clear, but there could be no mistake that the birth of this child marked the glorious beginning of something magnificent, and while Mary treasured and pondered all these words in her heart I'm sure that others did as well, including those shepherds.

This gift of grace from God was a glorious beginning indeed, and it continued. The shepherds returned, not merely reminiscing about what had happened, but glorifying and praising God for all that had happened, changed forever by their encounter with the divine. However, this event was not the end for the shepherds – it was just a beginning for them, a glorious beginning of a new life in their faith.

And that is perhaps the most important reason why we need to let ourselves move past the Christmas card views of this story, to move beyond simplistic, even bizarrely humorous views of this story, and to have it come alive in the way the gospel tells it. Because once again this blessed event is the beginning of a new life in our faith. As Christmas Eve and Christmas Day comes upon us, smell the sheep, share the metallic taste of fear in the mouths of the shepherds, shiver and quake with them in the presence of the messenger sent from God.

Refreshed by these senses we can begin to truly appreciate the magnificence, the earth-changing glory of this beginning of a new relationship between us and Almighty God, a new covenant of reconciliation to be sealed in his blood, but begun here in glory in a humble stable. Hear with ears ringing with the heavenly chorus and once again be moved to keep and ponder all these words in your hearts. Let your senses and your imagination draw you deeply into this story – a story of sheep and shepherds, of sweat, and flesh, and fear, and amazement – but most of all into the story of how the Lord came to share all that with us, in a glorious beginning of a story of unbounded grace and mercy. And then, like the shepherds, go on your way in life just like those shepherds, rejoicing and glorifying and praising God.