

# Worshipping the King

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**St Andrew's - 17th December 2023 - Luke 2:8-20**

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*8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,*

*14 "Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

*15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

## **Christmas is holy**

It's a proper nativity scene passage this morning - angels and shepherds and a baby in a manger. The real meaning of Christmas, as they say.

I've heard it my whole lifetime, a bemoaning of the increased consumerism, that the story at the heart of Christmas is flickering out of existence like old filament fairy lights. How many people have Christmas' devoid of Christian content - just tinsel and turkey and too much to eat and drink?

But no matter how hard the secular world might try, we just can't get rid of Christmas. A proper Scrooge at this time of year is very much the exception, even amongst those that oppose Christianity.

Even in the Soviet Union, Christmas was never quite gone. A country officially atheist, that took great efforts to stamp out religion - couldn't get rid of Christmas completely. Christmas as a particular public holiday was eliminated, as were all religious holidays. You could no longer avoid work on Christmas Day. But a few years later, New Years took on more significance, with the Christmas traditions largely being transferred wholesale - gift giving, decorations, fir trees with lights and a star on top, not to mention the encouragement of a healthy dose of goodwill and peace on earth. Now on the one hand, this was clever of the Soviet authorities who wanted to really secularise Christmas. They made sure the star on top was a soviet star, and avoided any mention of anything Christian, but on the other hand, they realised it can't just disappear. Once we've had Christmas, it's absence is almost unbearable. Imagine getting to December and no Christmas? There was a gaping hole, which had to be filled. Of course, now it's celebrated in the former soviet states much as it is here, albeit in some places on a different day.

The holiness, the supernatural-ness of Christmas is something we can't escape from. The 'Spirit of Christmas' is unavoidable. Part of why we celebrate Christmas because we cannot eradicate from our consciousness our profound awareness of the difference between the sacred and the profane.

When God touches earth, the place is holy. When God appears in history, the time is holy. Was there ever a more holy place on this earth than the city of Bethlehem, where the Word became flesh? Was there ever a more holy time than Christmas morning when Emmanuel was born? Christmas is a holiday, a holy day. It is amongst the holiest of holy days.

We sing about a silent night, maybe today's passage suggests it wasn't that silent, at least out in the fields around Bethlehem. However, it most certainly was a very holy night. Inescapably holy.

## While Shepherds watched...

Probably when you think of the story today, of the shepherds and the angels, you're thinking very much of the cute nativity scene that you might have set up at home. Or you might be thinking of children dressed up with tinsel halos or tea towels on their heads. Our preconception of what that night might have looked like is of angels that are fair and beautiful, singing lovely songs, as the fields are bathed in their soft radiance.

But the reality of what happened might have been quite different. As soon as an angel appears, the shepherds are filled with great fear. Shepherds were supposed to be tough people - think about David's time as a shepherd, having to defend himself and his flock from wild animals. These men are meant to be manly and brave, but the first sight of an angel and they're terrified. And this is just one angel to start with.

The kind of angels we see in scripture are not like the ones on the christmas cards. When angels appear in scripture, they tell people to not be afraid - because that's the natural reaction to them.

This is what happens in truly holy times and places. When the really holy is present, think the burning bush, or Moses up the mountain, or the Holy of Holies in the temple - these are places that spark a sense of terror or dread - we recognise these situations are something exceptional, somewhere we don't naturally belong.

One angel suddenly becomes a host of angels. This Greek word στρατιά (stratia) was used in Greek to refer to an organised force, such as a military army, and comes from the verb to make war, or to serve as a soldier. What we're seeing is not just a gentle choir that comes to serenade the occasion. This is much more frightening.

The first thing we read about the heavenly host, the army of angels, is that they are praising God, they are worshipping.

We can think that angels are really properly designed for worship, that's their job. Purpose built. They do it every day in heaven and must be pretty good at it by now. But in this respect, we're not that different - we too were created with the capacity for worship, and we can't escape it either.

## Inevitable Worship

For every creature, worship is inevitable. First, if by worship we mean putting something in the highest place, then it's logically necessary. You can't not have something put first - not everything is equal, nor should it be, and we all act as if something is most important.

Second, Paul tells us in Romans 1, that when we stop worshipping God - when we sin - we don't stop worshipping. We replace what we worship with something inferior. Paul says:

*22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*

*25 ...they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!*

They exchanged God for something else - they couldn't stop worshipping, but they could direct their worship to something else. We can read this and just think of the sort of idolatry that was present in the Old Testament - the golden calf, for example. That's an obvious example of replacing God, but today we're typically more sophisticated - physical idols are out of fashion and idolatry of ideas or emotions or ourselves is in style now. Either way, anything taking the place of God, is idolatry.

Think of what happened at the very beginning of the world. God creates the world, and He is in charge. The creator is rightly at the top of the hierarchy. Right under Him, is Adam, created in God's image, then comes Eve, his helper. At the bottom of the hierarchy is everything else - the animals that Adam has named, etc. And God said it was good. It was good that man understood his place in the world, and worshipped God as he was created to do.

But when sin entered the world, what happened? Well the serpent, an animal that Adam should have been in charge of, takes the lead. Eve, is less than helpful. Adam fails to take responsibility, and God gets left on the sidelines. When sin came along, the whole world turned on its head. What was up, became down. The good hierarchy that God instituted, that was good for all, was flipped over.

So worship is something we were created to do - we can't avoid it. But we can worship the wrong thing, rather than worship God. In this fallen world, our natural inclination is to worship wrongly, to worship the wrong thing. The essence of sin is taking God out of His rightful place in our affections, in our priorities, and putting something else there instead.

Adam and Eve estranged themselves from God - and we follow suit. Since the fall, there is now enmity between God and man.

## Flipping things over

What's the solution? How does this capsized world get righted? How is it that God, the creator of all things, can rightfully take His place as ruler over all once again?

Well if I put it like that - how can God *take charge* of things once more - it would sound like a heavenly army is just the ticket. But this heavenly army we read about hasn't arrived to quell the rebellion. They instead proclaim peace. They come to proclaim that the solution to the world's problems is lying in a manger, not far from there.

Planned since before creation, God himself, came to Earth as one of us, as a human being. The baby in the manger is nothing less than God incarnate, who lived among us. Deity and humanity perfectly present in Jesus Christ. The maker of the universe, yet confined to a fragile body, totally reliant on Mary and Joseph.

The God that deserves all the glory, gave up His glory, with the mission to restore us to glorifying Him. Paul writes these familiar words in Philippians 2 (5-11), the Carmen Christi:

*...Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

The second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, humbled himself to become one of us, that we might be brought back into communion with God, us put back in our rightful place and more importantly He put back in His.

## Crown Him as King

The first angel says to the shepherds (verse 10-11):

*“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.  
11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.*

Then the host of angels say (verse 14):

*“Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”*

The message is this - through the coming of Jesus Christ, our saviour, there is peace on earth, reconciliation with God. This is accomplished in part by His being glorified - He is Christ the *Lord*. And the result of this is or should be, for us, great joy. Peace and joy are the result of God being put back at the centre - of Christ being the King over all things.

This is what we sing at Christmas:

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come,  
Let earth receive her King.*

Christ comes as a helpless baby, yes, but He also comes as a King, the rightful King to set things straight again. His kingly reign is what we need, and the solution to our problems is that be our King.

Sinful man chafes at this - we want to be our own rulers, we don't want to be bossed around. But look how that turns out. That's what got us into this mess.

## Love first

Christ, as usual, is our example here - he does not take up His rightful place as King by force. He takes it up with humility. He does not take up His reign, without first being born as a baby, living a perfect life, suffering and dying for our sins. His reign is rightful, not only because He is the creator, but because He rules justly and perfectly - knowing our weaknesses and infirmities. He rules to the benefit of His people.

This is another of those ideas we love to fantasise about - the rightful King returning, bringing justice against the bad guys and freedom and happiness for the ordinary man. Think of Robin Hood, waiting for the good King Richard to return from crusade and fix things, or Lord of the Rings, where Aragorn is finally crowned King after so long and the world is put to rights. We enjoy these stories because they point to the reality of the situation here. We need Christ's reign, and whilst the rightful King is away from earth for the time being, he shall return.

1 John chapter 4:

*9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

God's nature is revealed in what He does for us. Christ's reign as King began in love for His enemies.

## **Go therefore**

To finish today's story, after the angelic appearance, the shepherds hurry off to Bethlehem to see what had happened. They go to see Mary, Joseph and Jesus, and once they have seen Him, they go out and spread the good news. They do not stay silent - Messiah is here, and they can't stay quiet about it. They glorify and praise God for all they had seen and heard.

Just like we hear Jesus tell us in the great commission - 'All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go'. We go, because He is already King. Our joining with the angels and the shepherds in proclaiming Christ has come, is not because we want Him to be King, or because we'd love your vote - no, He's the King already, come to turn the earth back rightside up and we have the glorious opportunity to join with Him, and worship Him as we were created to do.