

THE ESSENTIALS OF CHRISTMAS – LIGHT, JOY AND REFLECTION

Friends, in five days it will be Christmas! What do you think of as crucial to a good Christmas? Turkey? Christmas cards? A tree? Children? Family? I want to suggest based on the text we shall now read that there are three essential aspects, which our three characters show to us. One is light, which Zechariah proclaims. The second is joy, typified by the shepherds. And the third is Mary's reflection. I believe for a Christian, all three are both valid and essential – we'll consider as we go along whether they are part of our lives.

The light of Zechariah's prophecy

Zechariah – who was he? Let me just remind you, he was a priest of the Jewish temple and he and his wife had long been childless. Suddenly an angel had appeared to him and proclaimed that he would have a son. He didn't believe it and the angel as a result struck him dumb. But his wife Elizabeth did become pregnant and nine months later John the Baptist was born. Zechariah's tongue was freed and he sang the wonderful prophetic song we now call the "Benedictus". And here is the key section again, Luke 1:76-79 "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Do you see what he is saying? John the Baptist will have a role which will be to tell people of the need to repent. But mostly he will be preparing the way for a greater one. And the key element of that greater one is one of light, "the rising sun will come to us from heaven". And we know who that is – yes, Jesus. His light will shine on those living in the fear of death and bring peace to the world. What a beautiful prophecy! But it doesn't come in a vacuum. Zechariah as a priest would know well his Scriptures.

It was never God's intention that the world should be a place of darkness. At the beginning of creation, Genesis 1:1-4 states "God created the heavens and the earth.... Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness." So God created the light and saw that it was good. Light brought order to the previous chaos in the universe. It symbolised the close relationship of God to his creation, and especially to mankind in the Garden of Eden.

But what led to the darkness returning? The darkness that brought death in its wake? The darkness that was separation from God? It was mankind's sin. When Adam and Eve sinned against God in the Garden of Eden, God withdrew the light of his presence, and made us subject to the shadow of death, the death which is the consequence of sin. The Old Testament tells the tragic story of what followed. It's a tale of murder, theft, adultery, perversion, exploitation, and idolatry culminating in exile for God's people. And though by Jesus' time they were back in Israel, they still felt lost in darkness and separation from God.

And yet Zechariah knew too that right through the Old Testament there were promises of better things. Promises of God's light returning, linked to the end of death, healing, peace and salvation. A king of light from God himself, what they called the Messiah. Over a thousand years earlier the pagan Balaam prophesied over the Israelites in Numbers 24:17 "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out

of Israel.” A king of light was to come, one day. And again and again the light was promised, till Malachi, the last prophet proclaimed “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.” Zechariah knew God was promising the Messiah for those who have faith, and he will heal them of their sickness – physical, mental and spiritual.

But thereafter was a breathless pause. Malachi was the last prophet, God had not spoken for 400 years. Israel wondered if they had been forgotten. The promise of light, of God’s return hung in the air – till Zechariah, during his time of dumbness heard powerfully from God. Now is the time of salvation, the light of God was coming to shine on us all. And it came indeed that first Christmas.

Coming to know Christ is often described as an experience of coming to the light. Let me tell you how I experienced it. At the time I became a Christian I was very ill, with a debilitating sickness called Lyme Disease. But it also gave me a chance to read the scriptures, to take a break from my obsession with work. Then one night, I was invaded by a sense of terror. It was a feeling of powerlessness before forces of evil. I now know I was surrounded by demons that wanted to dissuade me from turning to Christ. My heart rate was at least twice normal, as if I had been running. At one stage I woke Claire and she said I looked white as a sheet. One thing I said, though was “I must stop reading the Bible”. Fear was overwhelming. But the torment was resolved triumphantly. I appealed to Jesus to save me from the invasion of evil. And the demonic forces fled away, to be replaced by a white light and a very real sense of Jesus’s presence. I knew then that he had been waiting for me for so long! Even as Paul said “God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us” Acts 17:27.

I believe the world is yearning for that light of Christ. Even today as Britain becomes more and more pagan, one of the key things at Christmas remains the lights. Have you noticed how the lights are getting more and more extravagant, the less the country is Christian? Lights on the tree, lights in the streets, lights in the window. People are striving for something they know is missing in their lives.

Will you have a Christmas of light? I believe that we as Christians are called to fully understand what the light of Christ means. It is what Zechariah proclaimed. That the light of Christ penetrates the darkness, reaching the lost who are separated from God. It rescues God’s people from the fate of death to which sin consigned them. And it brings peace! The first chapter of John summarises the coming of Jesus well. “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.” God was back among his people, the separation that began in Eden was no longer there. And the darkness is dispelled. We can look forward to a time when there will be no darkness at all, the New Heaven and the New Earth of Revelation. “There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.” A life transforming light. A different essential of Christmas from the rush and bustle! And a light whose meaning we can share with others who are lost in the spiritual darkness – this Christmas!

But we are also called to communicate with God this Christmas. Zechariah spoke as a prophet, telling the precise message that God’s Holy Spirit had bidden him to. We too can hear from God in this way. God is longing for us to have the gift of prophecy, of speaking his truth to the world. And I think a clue to receiving that gift is that Zechariah was dumb for so long. Too often in prayer we bombard God with requests, concerns, problems. He wants to hear them. But equally, when we just listen, when we become dumb, he can speak to us. Let’s try that too this Christmas!

The joy of the shepherd's proclamation

An essential feature of Christmas came to much humbler people than the learned Zechariah – the shepherds of Bethlehem. Shepherds were despised in that society. They were considered ruffians and also wicked. They were the dregs. A shepherd's testimony would often be discarded as invalid.

Let me mention of an incident in Sunday school. The Pastor was unusually telling a story to the young children instead of the Sunday school teacher. He told the children about sheep, that they weren't smart and needed lots of guidance, and that a shepherd's job was to stay close to the sheep, protect them from wild animals and keep them from wandering off and doing dumb things that would get them hurt or killed. He pointed to the little children in the room and said that they were the sheep and needed lots of guidance. Then the minister put his hands out to the side, palms up in a dramatic gesture, and with raised eyebrows said to the children, "If you are the sheep then who is the shepherd?" He was pretty obviously indicating himself. A silence of a few seconds followed. Then a young visitor said, "Jesus, Jesus is the shepherd." The young pastor, obviously caught by surprise, said to the boy, "Well, then, who am I?" The little boy frowned thoughtfully and then said with a shrug, "I guess you must be a sheep dog."

The humble shepherds were privileged beyond comprehension. The learned Zechariah had only prophesied the light, they became witnesses to it. What did they experience? Well, first it was fear. Who wouldn't be afraid when a mighty angel appears out of the darkness in blazing light of the glory of God. But soon their fear turned to excitement. For they heard a thrilling proclamation "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 Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And then a concert! "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 favor rests.""

Even humble shepherds knew that their nation was oppressed. The Romans were running the show, taxing the people up to the hilt, and God's promises of healing, of peace and salvation seemed far away. But yet here was a mighty proclamation of hope. A Saviour – one to rescue God's people from darkness. Christ – the name for the Messiah. The Lord – God himself. And peace to men. Not the peace that the Roman empire – or any other human country – ever brought, simply a lack of war. But the deeper peace of mind and soul made possible by the saviour. The angel is saying, these promises are to men on whom God's favour rests. But since the shepherds were so despised, God is showing that his peace, that would come through the light of Jesus, was not for the privileged but the lowly, the humble. It is there for you and me, for our neighbours, friends and family!

And look how they responded. Just like Malachi puts it they joyfully "leap like calves released from the stall". They follow the angels call to see the child. And then they rush off to tell everyone they can find about the child, the light of the world. "and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." No one ignored this story! The audience to the shepherds' report were amazed. Their response exemplifies the awe of those who hear Jesus' story with open ears. And the shepherds praised God.

Will you have a Christmas of joy like the shepherds? I hope so. Even a regular Christmas can be full of joy for many. Listen carefully! "And there were in the country children keeping

watch over their stockings by the fireplace. And lo! Santa Claus came to them; and they were so afraid. And Santa said unto them; "Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people who can afford them. For unto you will be given great feasts of turkey, stuffing and puddings; and this shall be a sign unto you, you shall find the presents, wrapped in bright paper, lying beneath a tree adorned with tinsel, coloured balls and lights. And suddenly there will be with you a multitude of relatives and friends, praising you and saying "thank you so much, it is just what I wanted". And it shall come to pass as the friends and relatives have gone away to their homes, the parents shall say to one another, "What a mess to clear up, lets go to bed and pick it up tomorrow. Thank goodness Christmas comes only once a year."

Yes, for all people Christmas is a great time for joy with family and friends, if a bit tiring. And it's such a time of joy for children. But as Christians we have grounds for a deeper joy. We praise God for the fact of our salvation as Christians. That we are people "on whom his favor rests". God has chosen us as his children. We need no longer live in darkness, fearing the shadow of death because through this child, who came on Christmas day, we are forgiven by God for our sins. When God looks at us he sees Jesus, the innocent lamb, instead of us and our filthy robes of sin. And he is guiding our feet into the path of peace. In Jesus we can find true rest, even amidst a dark world. So we are called to worship God out of gratitude.

And here's an interesting fact, that research has shown that people who celebrate the Christian meaning of Christmas are happier than those who mark the "happy holidays" just with consumer gifts. Dr Stephen Joseph of the University of Warwick said "research on happiness shows that religious people have a greater purpose in life, which is why they are happier. Research shows too that much too materialism in our lives can be terrible for happiness. He added "what seems to be crucial is living your life in a way that emphasises the importance of being involved in your community and caring for people, and Christmas is a reminder to us all of this message."

So we have greater joy, just like the shepherds did as they rushed around Bethlehem together proclaiming the good news they have experienced! Can we have that same infectious joy, that those who don't yet believe can't resist? I believe we can. And we will be blessed too if we are willing to consider those we know who are passing a sorrowful time at Christmas, being alone, bereaved, sick or in financial or relational difficulty. Let's pray for God to lay such people on our hearts, maybe we could invite them over to share our joy during the Christmas season!

The reflection of Mary on past, present and future

We've seen that Christmas is a time of light and joy. But there's another essential, and I believe that Mary the mother of Jesus shows it. Reflection on what it all means. Remember Mary was a simple young girl, who had suddenly been visited by the Angel Gabriel, who had proclaimed to her "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." Mary is a wonderful example of faith to us. Being told of the fact she would bear a child as a virgin, unlike Zechariah, she didn't contradict the angel but rather said "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." And later she sang the wonderful song of praise we call the Magnificat.

But yet, she must have been thinking all the time of her pregnancy. Can this really be true what is happening to me? What does it mean that I shall bear the "Son of the Most High"?

How could his kingdom have no end? And the angel did not return to her to answer her questions. And then, this hard road to Bethlehem, just when she was coming to the ninth month. No hospital, sterile surroundings or pain relief – as is still true in most of the world. A humble animal shed to shelter in. And then – a crowd of noisy smelly shepherds come charging in with incoherent stories of throngs of angels, the Saviour, Christ the Lord, peace to men..... What must she have thought? Yes, I'm sure she shared their joy. And yet to her perhaps an edge of foreboding. As it is written "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." I believe she knew the Servant Song of Isaiah 53, the greatest Messianic prophecy, which said "he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." So I think it was not a surprise when Simeon told her in the temple a few days later "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Will you have a Christmas of reflection like Mary? It's all too easy to be driven off our feet in the "Christmas rush" isn't it? Getting distracted by that phone call. All the shopping that needs to be done. But we can find time! Time to read the Scripture, pray and reflect on it, even as Mary did amidst the excitement. And the Scripture tells us – the meaning of Christmas is Easter. The meaning of Christmas is Easter. Jesus came to earth to fulfil that mighty prophecy of Isaiah, to die and rise again for us all. "After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities." Grounds for reflection at Christmas, don't you agree. This is how Jesus' light of Zechariah's prophecy would "shine on those living in darkness". By dying and rising again. This is how the saviour, Christ the Lord would bring peace to men on whom his favour rests as the angel proclaimed to the joyful shepherds.

Here's just one pointer to Easter in the Christmas story. Since Bethlehem is close to Jerusalem, the shepherds would be guarding the sheep and lambs who were destined for slaughter in the temple. The sacrifice that the Jews believed would bring forgiveness for sins. And who does John the Baptist later call Jesus? The lamb of God, who would be sacrificed for our sins. Easter in Christmas, a matter for reflection.

Conclusion

Lets wrap up. I love Luke's account of Christmas. This is a doctor writing, a man of precision and detail, just like me as an economist. He is not telling us some dreamy mythical account of Jesus' birth. We have the gritty filth of the stable, the ruffianly shepherds gazing and peering, and the historical positioning of the event. "Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)" Don't let anyone tell you that Jesus is just a figment of the imagination, we can be surer of his life and death than of Julius Caesar, Plato, Cleopatra or any other ancient figure. And we know for another reason – we have met with Jesus in our hearts. And he is with us now. Christmas for Christians, although it will also have its fill of decorations, food and presents, is fundamentally a time of light, of joy and reflection. When we know that Jesus, the word of God, became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

It's a time too for us to remember those who don't know Jesus yet, for whom Christmas is a time of neon, quarrels and rush. We may speak to them of what Christmas really means. But even if we don't, we can share Jesus love. as has been said "Christmas is most truly Christmas when we celebrate it by giving the light of love to those who need it most." Wouldn't it be wonderful if this church and its people was known – at Christmas and at other times – as a

beacon of light, with a heart of joy, one where everyone, no matter how poor and needy, met with unconditional love? Lonely people, homeless people, those who are sick, those struggling to make ends meet, those locked into addiction? Can't you see the light shining from this building already?

May God bless you all and make your Christmas indeed a time of light, joy and reflection.