

## **Hark The Herald Angels Sing**

13<sup>th</sup> December 2009 (am)

*[Start with writing a Christmas card]*

“Please do sit down, if you can just bear with me a second, I’m just trying to finish writing this Christmas card. It’s for my friend Mark. I won’t be long... Oh, I never know what to put in Christmas cards. How’s it sound so far... “Dear Mark...” Oh I don’t know, I’ll have to finish it later when I’ve got more time to think.

I did wonder about the card too. Do you think it’s alright? It’s perhaps a bit reserved I know. I thought about getting one of those cards that plays a tune when you open it up, or I did see in the shops this year cards that you can record your own message. Very cool – very expensive too.

I suppose I could always send an email. Even Father Christmas now has an email address. Mind you I’m not sure he’s very good at keeping on top of his emails. Story – little girl who went to see Santa – “What do you want for Christmas” – “Didn’t you get my email?]

Or what about text message. It seems that texting is the way to get a message to someone these days. We don’t have time to talk to anyone so we send a text instead. Of course the health and safety people would tell us that texting is better for our health because mobile phones give off radiation which affects us when we hold them to our ears. Of course the fact that you get run over while your texting is missing the point.

But how would you send a really important message?

- In the old days it would have been done by telegram,
  - o Perhaps a little limited on what you could write, but it ensured the message got through quickly
- During the First World War some very important messages were sent by pigeon – many pigeons even received bravery awards. Apparently there was a special medal which was the animal equivalent to the Victoria Cross and more of these got awarded to pigeons than any other creature.
- God however, used something far more spectacular than that – he used angels.

Angels are all over the Christmas story. An angel appears to Zechariah to tell him he and Elizabeth will have a son (John the Baptist). An angel visits Mary and an angel visits Joseph to tell of the birth of Jesus. And angels visit the shepherds. Angels are nice aren’t they? We like angels. Little girls are always delighted when they get asked to play an angel in the school nativity play (unless of course they were hoping to be Mary). Angels are sweet little girls floating on clouds, playing a harp with a shiny halo and tin foil wings.

So why is it that every time an angel appears in the Bible the first thing they say is “do not be afraid”?

It says in our passage today that the shepherds were terrified.

...it seems that the people of Israel had a very different view of Angels. Perhaps because the story that was told to them again and again concerning Angels was of the Angel of Death!

- This was part of their history.
- Story would be retold at the festival of booths. How the people were delivered out of the slavery of Egypt. The plagues that God sent on Egypt – final plague was the angel of death.
- The ark of the covenant also had two angels above it and we know that when people got too near to the ark, they died.
- The garden of Eden had an angel guarding the entrance (Gen 3:24)
- Israelite people knew that angels had some serious power and it wasn't always good news.

But this was GOOD news – this was GREAT news. The most important message in history.

There are some key elements to messages and I want to look quickly at them.

### **FROM: GOD**

First of all it is important to know who the message is from. Very often when we get a letter through the post and the address is hand written, Ruth will tell me who it's from before we've even opened the envelope. She can tell by the handwriting who sent it. Of course there might be

- Marks of the sender
  - o Handwriting
  - o Postmark
  - o Franking Mark (company)
  - o Senders postcode on back
- Marks of sender being God
  - o Angels – God's messengers – Whole sky filled with Angels
  - o Awesomeness
  - o Majesty
  - o Angels sing "Glory to God"
  - o Unmistakable marks of a message from God
- A message we should pay attention to.

### **TO: Shepherds (and everyone)**

It's also important to know who the message is addressed to. Ruth and I know all about this problem. You see we live at number 1B. And depending on how you write "1B" it could be read as 18, 16, or even 113.

- An awesome, majestic royal message from God and it comes to a bunch of shepherds. And you have to wonder, 'did the postman get the wrong address?' Were the angels in the wrong place?
- (v10) "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for ALL PEOPLE"
- Who better to start with than the working classes? Simple shepherds, to show that this news really is for all people. If the message had been given

only to posh people, they may have kept it to themselves. Perhaps it wouldn't have been shared with the working class shepherds. But God didn't give them that option. He shared the news with them himself.

- The shepherds didn't keep it to themselves – they spread the word to everyone.
  - o (v17) “When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told to them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.”

### **MESSAGE: A SAVIOUR HAS BEEN BORN**

If a message is important then it needs to be clear enough to be understood. Especially if you are addressing simple people like shepherds. Train station announcers used to have a gift for making their announcements unclear. Everyone on the platform looks at each other and they're all saying the same thing, “what did he say?” You would think it would be clearer if things were written down but text messages? I get text messages from my mom now that are abbreviated. I'm sure she thinks she's being trendy but the text message will say something like “r u ok, lakin 4ward 2 cing u”. Ruth's mom is even worse. When she first learnt how to text, she knew how input all the letters except she didn't know how to insert spaces. So you got a constant stream of letters and it was like a puzzle to work out where the spaces were. To combat all this, mobile phone designers came up with ‘predictive text messaging’. Hmmm.

Thankfully God's message is much clearer. (v11) “Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

What an amazing message to be given. The long awaited Messiah, the Christ, the Saviour had been born and the shepherds were among the first to know.

- The shepherds are even given instructions on how to identify him:
  - o <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

### **RSVP**

All of this prompts a response.

(15) <sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

<sup>16</sup>So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

You get a sense of excitement when you read that. The shepherds had gone through a whole set of emotions that night. They started off being terrified but when they heard what the angel said, they were very excited and I imagine there was excitement in their voices when they said to one another “let's go and see it!” and they HURRIED off. I imagine them running across the fields, perhaps tripping over a few times, after all it was dark. Eager to get to the manger.

The message the angel brought was for ALL PEOPLE – not just those living 2,000 years ago, but for all people, for all time. This saviour that has been born is our saviour, Jesus Christ. We are the outcasts in the family of God. But he invites us today to be part of that family to be part of the people of God. That's why Jesus came, so as simple people like me and you could be adopted into his family.

The invitation is there – don't leave it too long before you reply will you.