

SERMON FOR LAYREADERS

CHRISTMAS DAY MORNING PRAYER

Brian McKee¹

First Lesson:²

Here beginneth the second Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

Second Lesson:⁴

Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.⁵

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should

be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius [SYE-reen-ee-uss] was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

O tidings of comfort and joy.

Let us pray:

Almighty and loving God, who sent Thine only Son Jesus Christ to be born in a humble stable on this morning, long ago, and sent Thine holy angels to announce Christ's birth to simple, lowly shepherds: give us the assurance that Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd; strengthen our faith; give courage to us, that we may share the Good News of Christ's birth with those with whom we come in contact each day; and help us to break down walls and welcome all people to repent, be baptized and find eternal life in Christ Jesus. Grant this through Jesus Christ our Good Shepherd. *Amen.*

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² *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928/1943).

³ Isaiah 9:2-7 (KJV).

⁴ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928/1943).

⁵ St. Luke 2:1-20 (KJV).

⁶ St. Luke 2:8-11 (KJV).

Not to mention that angels were there to spread the news of this Saviour's birth! It just does not happen every-day that angels spread the word that a normal, human baby has been born.

The Good News that we remember, is that on this day, long ago those angels proclaimed the news that sets all of us free from sin and death: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Because of God's gift of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, we can truly say: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave where is the victory?" Because Jesus Christ came to the earth as our Saviour, we can have life eternal.

Let us ponder the words of this wonderful old English Christmas Carol:

God rest ye merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Saviour
Was born on Christmas Day;
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray.
O tidings of comfort and joy.
"Fear not, then," said the angel,
"Let nothing you afright;
This day is born a Saviour
Of a pure virgin bright,
To free all those who trust in him
From Satan's power and might."
O tidings of comfort and joy.

Now to the Lord sing praises,
All you within this place,
And with true love and brotherhood
Each other now embrace;
This holy tide of Christmas
Doth bring redeeming grace.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."⁶

Homily:

Merry Christmas!

There are no happenstances with God. God has a plan and a purpose. The Bible is full of symbolism. The symbolism is always fulfilled. The symbolism always points to a divine truth.

It is certainly no happenstance that Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, was born in a humble stable, among the animals. The act of the only-begotten Son of God coming to earth to save unworthy sinners is the ultimate act of humility. Thus, the humble place of His birth, a stable, helps to point this out to us. It is God's way of making sure that we humans "get it", and truly understand that even coming to earth was a sacrifice for the Son of God.

It is also no happenstance that the first people to be told of the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ were the shepherds. This was very symbolic. This was symbolism that would later point to one of the greatest truths about this Son of God who was born in Bethlehem on that night long ago.

Shepherds were hard-working and necessary people. The flocks that they cared for provided clothing and meat for the people. The sheep could not survive without the dedicated care of the shepherds.

Shepherds were very poor. Some shepherds were known for poor behaviour in society. As often happens, the bad deeds of a few sometimes color human perceptions of a whole group. This was certainly true of shepherds. They were not all that well thought of in society at that time.

It is no happenstance that the shepherds were the first to hear of the birth of the Saviour. Who could have needed the love and forgiveness of the Incarnate Son of God, the Saviour, more than shepherds? That the angels welcomed and invited the shepherds to come and see the Saviour, before the rich and powerful, or the self-proclaimed righteous, is a very important indicator that Jesus had come into the world not to condemn sinners, but to forgive them, and save them. It indicates that earthly social status does not matter to God. In God's eyes, all are equal, and all deserve His grace and forgiveness.

It is symbolic in yet another way that the first people to hear of Jesus Christ's birth were the shepherds. In the book of John, chapter 10, verses 11 through 16, Jesus said:

“I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall

hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.”

What could better foreshadow Christ's own preaching, that he was the “Good Shepherd”, more effectively than for first people who learned of His birth to be shepherds? Things just don't happen at random with God. Remember, God always has a plan.

Jesus Christ's sermon, that He is the Good Shepherd, is a very significant statement. Jesus is thus making it clear to his audience that his “sheepfold” -- the Church -- will include all peoples. Jesus is making it clear that the Gentiles will be welcome in the Church. Jesus is making it clear that people of all races, classes, and circumstances in life will be able to repent, be baptized, and be welcomed into His Church.

Jesus is also making a profound statement that shows His humility, love, and sympathy for humankind. Instead of identifying with the rich, or the powerful, from the beginning Jesus identified Himself with the lowly shepherds. This shows that His love was for all. Jesus further made this clear during His ministry when He ate with the outcasts of society, the unpopular, those who were considered “sinners” by the Jewish people. Jesus told a parable in which the hero was a “good Samaritan”, knowing the Jews who heard Him despised Samaritans.

This Son of God was truly a Saviour. As the Son of God come to earth, He was completely different than anything the world expected, and certainly different from the earthly king that the Jewish people expected as their Messiah. His very birth, this very morning, long ago in that stable of Bethlehem, is just the kind of symbolic, unique birth that told the world that He was not just another baby whose parents could not find a room in the Inn.