

Christmas Eve – Luke 2.1 – 14

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while^{qu} Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’

¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.’*

Hopes and Fears...

I wonder if, like me, this Christmas brings you many hopes but some fears too. 2020 has been a year of profound difference for all of us – not one of us could have known, predicted, or even contemplated, how it would all pan out; how long it would all last – and we still don’t know really, do we. I remember in March thinking ‘well by the summer I hope that it will all be over’ and then in the summer, ‘I fear it might not be over by the winter’.

I guess that Mary had hopes too, and Joseph some fears perhaps, way back then. Mary – will the baby wait till we get home? I hope so... Will he be healthy, and will I be able to look after him properly? I hope so... Joseph – the Emperor has called a census – surely, we won’t have to travel, will we? I fear so... Will there be somewhere safe for us to stay if we get to Bethlehem? I fear not...

Do hope and fear always travel hand in hand? I have been reflecting on this for a while. In my own experience I think that they do, and as I look to scripture it would seem so too. Right at the beginning in Genesis, Adam and Eve trusted God completely until Satan questioned that trust, doubt began to creep in, and they feared that God was withholding something from them. They wanted to know all and be all, like God was. Sounds like pride, doesn’t it? Fear and its consequences of doubt, anxiety, stress and strain have been plaguing human beings ever since. It was a stronghold on many in the past and it’s a stronghold on many now. There is a whole heap of fearful people in Scripture, Moses, and David just to name two of the most famous! So how did they find hope? We only have to read their stories to see... David prayed, he learnt that hope comes from God, and it can be found in all circumstances if you look hard enough. Both of them learn that fear doesn’t have the final say, God does, he has power over fear. That doesn’t mean that we won’t have fears, but it does mean that, much more importantly, we have hope – that we are not alone in our fear. God’s hands hold ours.

I wonder what hopes and fears the Shepherds had on that night when they were minding their own business (and their sheep I hope!) out in the fields and hills above Bethlehem. Perhaps they were wondering about the census too, fearful that with all the extra people around they would miss out on the best pasture for their flock the next day, thinking about their families and hoping they would be able to find or buy enough food for the next few days. Fear does funny things to us, like I said, it takes a hold of us, and so we can see why, when they see the angel of the Lord, they are terrified, and so can he, ‘Don’t be afraid, I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people’.

In their moment of fear the angel brings the shepherds news of great hope, and he explains what that 'hope' will look like, a new-born baby, wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger, an animal food trough! I wonder if they really did think that that could possibly be a hopeful sign – it doesn't sound much like one, does it? It smacks of poverty beyond belief, with the Roman Empire holding sway over the land – how could such a baby be a sign of hope? But as the angel is joined by more, all praising God and talking about his favour resting and bringing peace, their fear dares to wonder towards hope as they decide to go and see for themselves – has such a baby been born tonight?

As we read the familiar story again, I wonder what your hopes and fears are tonight. Perhaps, like some of mine, they go deep and seem almost impossible to even acknowledge – and yet this story brings us something to help us release our fear and hold onto the hope – it brings comfort and joy. It brings comfort because it reminds us that God has not forgotten us and right from that first moment when Adam and Eve let fear and doubt have a foothold in their hearts, God has been planning his comfort for us in Jesus, that will rebuild our relationship with God and take away any need for any fear and so give us great hope for our future. And when we have the hope of our faith, we can then share that hope and bring the joy of it to others.

In these quiet moments together, let's recognise that we are all people with hopes and fears, yes, but more importantly, that we can all know the one who longs to bring us comfort and joy if we will let him – and his name is Jesus.

Prepared by Sue Willetts

Christmas Eve Prayers led by Fiona Barber

In the quiet of the night
as we wait, we hold before you
all our hopes and fears.

In these difficult times
we thank you for the wondrous gift of your Son.
Born this night, a tiny child, in a stable in Bethlehem
we think on the words of the angels that brought such hope
“Don't be afraid, I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people.”

In the quiet of the night
we pray for all those who face disappointment, whose plans have had to change and who miss the hugs and laughter of family this Christmas.
We pray for those that live in fear.
For those that are lonely and isolated.
For those who are displaced or homeless.
“Don't be afraid, I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people.”

In the quiet of the night
we pray for those that mourn.
for those that are unwell or struggling at this time,
we pray for all those that need to know your comfort Lord, this Christmas time.
“Don't be afraid, I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people.”

In the quiet of the night
as we wait for the morning star
to proclaim the Holy birth
may we all find joy in the glad tidings.

May we all know peace on earth. May you come to us and abide with us Our Lord, Emmanuel. Amen.

