



THE NEW SHOFAR

Hark the herald angels sing: "Glory to the new born King. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled".

Christmas

Christmas begins with the gift of hope

Luke's Christmas story opens with an annunciation by an angel--the first of three. Angels are by definition messengers, and the good news they bear in this story is in every case a *promise*. A guarantee.

The angel appears to Zacharias who immediately takes fright. But the angel goes on to reassure him *Fear not*. This phrase is repeated in each of the three annunciations and is of great significant as it stands as the first of the Christmas guarantees. We have nothing to fear in taking up the invitation of God to take part in His new world. In Jesus, He offers us a new life in a transformed world, a world enlightened by the coming of the Christ child. This is what John the Baptist will proclaim.

In verse 26 Luke introduces a second annunciation, this one to the Virgin Mary. The angel appears, commands her to *rejoice* and calms her with a further Fear not! His promise is that she shall conceive and bear a son and that the child shall be called *Son of the Highest*. The Kingdom inaugurated by this child will be a kingdom without an ending. This last cannot be said to have happened (Or to have happened completely). What this does is highlight the way Christmas is a proclamation of the faithfulness and reliability of God. We celebrate because all God has promised in the past are now being fulfilled. We can trust God. We can rely on God.

Joy and promise come together in one gift

Luke then describes the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, with their conversation centring on *joy* and *promise* proclaimed in a song.

This song of Mary is the *Magnificat*, and it opens with this note of *joy*. From there it moves onto a description of the way God has been offering this gift from the very beginning, while Adam and Eve are moving out of the Garden of Eden after rejecting God's authority and falling into sin. We now live in that period of human history when heavenly joy is once more accessible. A part of the beauty of what is happening is the way God has been working on this since the promise He made to Abraham. God had never – never given up on His creatures.

This is a part of the third annunciation with the angels speaking to the shepherds. The child is born and these angels break into a declaration of a range of promises given to men and women on earth. This child, for those who believe in Him, will make real a number of gifts – a life free of fear, *good tidings of great joy*, gifts that

are accessible to *all men and women* (no limits on who can line up for these gifts). Furthermore, the angels highlight how this all flows from this child in the manger. The child is called a *saviour* and he rest of the gospel will go on to proclaim how this is a two part salvation – a salvation *from* and a salvation *for*. We are set free from pointless living, a life without direction and purpose that begins when we are born and ends when we die. We are set free from our sins and our failings that we may be reborn into a new life lived *for* the purposes of God. We have a place in creation. We have been created as significant components in what God is doing on earth. Freed from our sins, we have a new horizon opened up for us and the graces we need to fulfil those wonderful promises.

The angels too rejoice

When the angels sing their song of celebration, they too have the same message of *hope*: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace [*shalom*]. We have experienced that *shalom* before. It was the dominant character of life in the Garden of Eden prior to the introduction of sin. In and through this Christ-child, we are restored to the people we were created to be. Life after that first Christmas is to have the real possibility of Eden experiences – men and women living together in a community of love and respect, life lived around God in their midst.

Luke describes this as being a *light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.*" Christmas is a gift for the world, whether or not the world actually wants or feels it needs that gift. We were never created to be living without the kind of intimacy with God we find described in Genesis – *the man and the woman walking with God in the cools of the evening*. Living in that way, we have God shaping who we are and how we speak and act. It is only when the snake replaces God as the one we turn to for guidance and hope that things go awry.

Looking back that we may know the future with assurance

One of the consistent themes of the Christmas stories in both Matthew and Luke is how we can look back over Israel's story of her ups and downs with God and find reassurance as we move into the future. God stood by His chosen people. They sinned. They pursued other gods. They tried to build their lives on their own skills, feelings and achievements and God picked them up time and time again. Dusted them off and sent them off again. Each time they restarted their pilgrimage, God promised he would be with them. Alongside of them. They would reach their goal because God would be ensuring they do.

The Christ-child in the manger at Bethlehem is the fulfilling of those promises. We are now no longer talking about the Hebrew people alone. They were especially chosen by God that people of every race and tribe, people and nation could have the same possibilities and opportunities. That is where we find ourselves today. This is our Christmas. This is our pledge for the future. Whatever 2022 might promise, if it unfolds under the guidance and presence of Almighty God, then we will experience the kind of *joy* and *shalom/peace* that God has been providing from the beginning. The only limitations to that will be limitations we ourselves might seek to impose by our failures to make the most of what was opened up on that first Christmas.