

Christmas Day 25.12.15 C St Stephen's 10.30 Lk 2: 8-19

*"Peace on earth, goodwill to men with whom he is well pleased." (v14)*

*"Mary kept these things and pondered them in her heart."  
(v19)*

The first Christmas came and went with hardly a ripple. The inn-keeper and his wife would have remembered the night when a baby was born in their stable to a young woman forced to travel at the wrong time because of the census. The shepherds and the wise men would certainly have remembered that night. And Mary must have spent a lifetime pondering these things in her heart. But once Christmas is over, what will we remember?

The significance of Jesus' birth was hidden from most people that first year, as it seems to be lost on most people today. Certainly, the majority don't hear the song of the angels as it is drowned by the noise of men.

And man, at war with man, hears not  
The love-song which they bring;  
O hush the noise, ye men of strife  
And hear the angels sing.

And what is it that the angels sing? It's known by many as recorded in the AV: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, goodwill towards men." But that's not quite what the Greek says, which is: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among men of goodwill."

So rather than a blanket blessing on all, the message of the angels was for those who displayed goodwill towards others. It's a reflection of the petition in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The disobedient do not receive God's blessing or forgiveness.

The peace of which the angels sang is not the absence of unrest or trouble, but the presence of harmony. It is about

our relationships, which are positive, life building and affirming.

We may argue about doctrine or how the Bible should be read and understood; but at the end of the day, faith is about a relationship with the risen Christ which finds expression in worship on the one hand, and in service to others on the other, reflecting the twin commandments to love God and to love our neighbour.

We have been called by God to be those who work to bring peace on earth; or in St Paul's words: "He has enlisted us in this service of reconciliation." (2Cor 5: 18) But we can't begin to help bring this reconciliation if we have not found that peace in our own lives. If we remain unreconciled with God or with our neighbour, we are in no state to help in this work.

If the work of reconciliation seems daunting, it helps to bring it down to the everyday. How are we treated, and how do we behave towards others? Bad manners, aggressive behavior, thoughtlessness, rudeness are all far too common. The way in which we convey who we are and what we believe, how we demonstrate the peace of god in our lives is through courtesy, integrity, good humour, sensitivity, trustworthiness, purity of living, generosity, patience. Nothing very startling, but qualities which rub off on others and can encourage them to respond likewise.

Ella Joseph was a Jewish woman who was separated from her children during WW2. Sadly they lost their lives in Auschwitz. Ella was a concert violinist, and her response on hearing the news after the war, was to pick up her violin, and travel round Germany playing her violin and telling her story. But she was not seeking vengeance; she spoke of the world's deep need for reconciliation, without which it would tear itself apart – words apposite for today's world.

"If I, a Jewish mother, can forgive what happened," she said to audiences in Germany, and in N. Ireland, and Lebanon and in Israel, "then why can you not sink your differences and be reconciled to one another?"

The picture that most of us will have in our minds at Christmas is of the baby lying in the manger, with Mary and Joseph standing by and the animals in the background. That's only part of the picture, for to the stable came the shepherds, and later the wise men, both of which groups it is worth thinking about.

The shepherds were hard working, tough men. Used to living out in the open, caring for their flocks, and prepared to deal with wild animals attacking their animals. These were not from comfortable backgrounds, but used to hard living. Yet they come and they worship the Christ-child.

The wise men were very different. They were the men who were held in honour by their fellows for their knowledge and understanding of the mysteries of the universe and of life. And these men come many miles to worship the Christ-child.

Both these groups come and kneel in homage to this baby. There was no intellectual pride preventing their worship, which is the fault of many today. And perhaps what they are telling us is that unless we are prepared to offer the things we most value to God, we will not be able to enter the inheritance of god's children.

Mary pondered these things in her heart, and so should we. When Christmas is over, the truth remains that God reached out to humanity through the birth of this baby, and offers us his love. We don't have to earn it, or spend a lifetime working to make ourselves worthy to receive it; we just have to accept it, and go on through prayer and worship to build up the relationship, learning what it means truly to love.

Sadly far too many of us are calculating about the things we do – generous, yes, but with an eye to our own advantage as well. Like the man who found an old lamp on the seashore. He picked it up and rubbed to get some of the dirt off, and a genie appeared. "I will grant you one wish," it said.

The man thought for a moment, and replied: "My brother and I had a fight 30 years ago and he hasn't spoken to me since. I wish that he'd finally forgive me."

There was a thunderclap and the genie announced: "Your wish has been granted. You know," he continued, "most men would have asked for wealth or fame. But you only wanted the love of your brother. Is it because you are old and dying?"

"Not at all," the man replied. " But my brother is, and he's worth about £60 million!"

I'll give the last word to John Betjeman:

And is it true? And is it true,  
This most tremendous tale of all,  
Seen in a stained glass window's hue,  
A baby in an ox's stall?  
The maker of the stars and sea  
Became a child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,  
No loving fingers tying strings  
Around those tissueed fripperies,  
The sweet and silly Christmas things,  
Bath salts and inexpensive scent  
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,  
No carolling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steep-shaking bells  
Can with this single truth compare –  
That God was Man in Palestine  
And lives today in bread and wine.