*The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.*

Sermon for Christmas Eve

# Luke 2:1–20

If any of you grew up in the Church and were ever in a Nativity Play as children, you’ll know that one of the first things to be organised were the groups of angels and shepherds.

A few of the more confident children might score the roles of Mary and Joseph, or the Wise Men, but the rank-and-file average Sunday school child, slotted in line, year after year, as a faithful angel or shepherd. They were the backbone of the Nativity Play.

The fact that these two groups - angels and shepherds - were side by side in the Christmas story, is worth thinking about, because they were quite an unlikely pair. A Pastor once visited a Childcare Centre next to his church to read the Christmas story with the children. A little girl brought this into even sharper focus for him. Because before he began he asked if anyone knew what a shepherd was? One of the little girls said, ‘Yes, a shepherd has wings and flies through the air’.

What was going on? She had confused angels and shepherds, so close was the association between them in her mind.

It is really incredible that these two groups—shepherds and angel—should be so closely connected in our minds. Because…

On the one hand, you have the angels.

From the Bible we learn that angels are part of God’s creation, they aren’t eternal, they are created beings, and yet they are heavenly beings. God’s angels are untainted by sin and evil - they are pure and holy. They live in the presence of God, continually enjoying His glory, filled with the “light” of heaven. Their whole purpose is to adore and praise the Triune God, and to be His messengers and servants for God’s people on earth. Angels appear right through the story of the Bible. But it’s worth noting that there seems to be an explosion of angels around the birth of Jesus.

Then on other hand, you’ve got the shepherds.

For a start, they’re only human beings living on earth. But more than that, in the world of those days, being a shepherd was some of the lowliest and most humble work a person could do. Notice in our text they were ***living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks at night.*** Can you imagine what they would have looked like and smelt like spending their life out with the animals in the fields? This was probably not the sort of life vocation parents aspired to for their children. They are the sort of people we would think of as “a bit rough around the edges”.

Have you ever noticed too, that we never find out these shepherds’ names! They’re sort of presented to us as “no-bodies” in the eyes of the world. They’re perhaps on the bottom rung of social ladder.

So there’s a sense in which these two groups: the angels and the shepherds, represent the highest of heaven, and the lowest of earth. Those who are pure and holy, and those who are unclean. Those who live in the light, and those who live in the darkness.

So what about us?

Let’s say we were casting roles for our nativity play tonight with all of us in the cast. In which role would we fit? Shepherds, or angels?

Perhaps we’d like to think that there are at least some angelic-like aspects to our lives. It may be that, in reality, we tend to be a bit more shepherd-like. Most, if not all of us, may have a few rough edges as a result of things which may have happened to us and things for which we ourselves were responsible.

How has this past year been for us? Like the shepherds, have there been things happen which made us feel like we’re at the bottom of the heap too? Issues with health, family, work, relationships?

The dark corners of this world are a constant threat to our peace and security.

Or, has it been our own failures and mistakes which have reminded us that we’re far from being an angel? The darkness that lurks in our own heart—things, perhaps, which even make us cower in fear like those shepherds in the field?

The shepherds were living in the darkness of night, exposed to the elements with their flocks. Our deepest problem is that, apart from God’s grace, we live in the darkness of our sin exposed to death.

But at Christmas, being a shepherd is the best possible place to be… Not because the shepherds reach their way up to heaven to be with the angels, but because the angels are sent from heaven to earth with good news for the shepherds.

In our fear, in our sadness, in our sins, let us listen to the words of the angel from heaven:

***“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.”***

For ***all*** the people. That includes us!

Jesus is born as ***our*** Saviour.

Christ, the Son of God, comes into this world as one of us. He is the King of angels, but He was born with the poor and lowly and laid ***in a manger,*** in a cattle shed. In Jesus God assumes our human flesh with all its rough edges, except He was born without our sin.

Jesus lived the life we couldn’t live on our own. He died the death we deserved - all to be our Saviour. All we can do is receive this ***good news of great joy***! Jesus is the reason angels and shepherds can be side by side. Jesus brings heaven and earth together, because in Jesus, humanity is reconciled to God.

We are reconciled to our Father, God. That’s why the angels sing: ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favour rests.”* (verse 14).**

Those God favours are those who are found in Christ, having received the good news of great joy. Sin and evil want to divide and drive apart, but God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in the business of bringing together, bringing peace. And that is ***good news of great joy***.

What Jesus has done, cannot be undone. And so heaven and earth continue to be joined together even this very night.

You might remember singing in the well-known carol:

*‘Sing choirs of angels,*

*Sing in exultation,*

*Sing all ye citizens of heaven above,*

*Glory to God, in the highest…’*

‘Sing choirs of angels’.

We sing these words tonight, not in some imaginary way, as if we have travelled back in time to the fields surrounding Bethlehem, We acknowledge the presence of the angels here and now because the reconciliation Jesus has brought between heaven and earth, between God and humanity, is a permanent change which still today protects us from our old shepherd-like rough edges and the dark corners of our lives.

We worship together with heaven. We glorify God together with the angels, As we gather in worship, heaven and earth are brought together all because of the Saviour who was born for us.

That’s why Sunday by Sunday we sing ‘Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased…’

And again, *‘together with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven, we adore and praise your glorious name’.*

God may not give shepherds wings to fly through the air like the little Child Care Centre girl suggested, but He does transform shepherds into something *close* to angels. Have you ever noticed what the shepherds do at the end of the Christmas story? They return glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, which *is* just what the angels had been, and are doing.

The coming of Jesus our Saviour, that good news of great joy, is something which did change the shepherds. May that good news of great joy that is our Saviour’s birth for us, do its work in our lives once again this Christmas.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.