

Peace (Luke 2:1-14)

11:30pm Midnight Holy Communion – 24th December 2025

Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

<Prayer>

First of all, may I repeat such a warm welcome to you, at what is a gathering that you have to make quite sure you want to come to. Each of us has made this late and special effort to be here, when the alternative might have been to just turn-in. **I'm sure Almighty God smiles upon your good choice tonight.**

By the time we are blessed and sent out from here, you will depart to what I expect to be a pretty quiet set of roads. Most homes will be lights-off, all shops are shut, and nothing much is stirring. Perhaps you will find that to be a quiet moment ahead of all the Christmas activities you may have planned. If you are travelling around for family gatherings (as I myself am), then you will most likely notice the contrast between this peaceful moment and all of the rest of Christmas Day busyness. **My hope for you this evening is that you can have this time of reflection for something a bit deeper, and what we might call *being at peace*.**

It's about 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, across a stretch of land we now call Israel. That is a route from the north area around Galilee, down to the southern lands, known as Judea in New Testament times. Mary and Joseph had to make that journey south for reason given:

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There would have been some sort of road network or recognisable pathways for the journey, but it was done with Joseph walking and Mary heavily pregnant, sitting on a donkey. I can't imagine it would have been a very pleasant experience, especially since they had

apparently no relatives in Bethlehem to stay with and the whole of the return journey to cope with too. In fact, things would not turn out quite as they might have expected, as I'm sure you know from all which later happens as across the whole nativity story.

The idyllic setting of the Bethlehem stable, so beautifully depicted in what must be the most painted scene of all time, **was I'm sure a place of stress for the holy family.** You may remember that the final scene of the nativity story is the divine warning given to Joseph in a dream that he should flee with Mary to Egypt because of the terrible threat of King Herod, who goes on to order the Slaughter of the Innocents. Let me just remind you of that:

Now after the Wise Men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.

Eventually, after what I suppose was quite a long time, Joseph received another dream to tell him the way was safe for them return home. **If I tell you that the word I wish amplify tonight is 'peace' then please see quite a lot of the opposite in the nativity story.**

I can't claim that 2025 has been a year of peace. I wonder how you feel about that personally? January saw the expected inauguration of President Trump, which within days equalled political mayhem in the form of scatter-gun tariffs and ridiculous territorial claims around Canada and Greenland. That sent the all too sensitive global financial system into a spin. Who can forget the bizarre row with President Zelenskyy in the Oval Office, juxtaposed with the salacious meeting of the presidents of Russia and America on the Alaskan tarmac.

Israel and Gaza continued to provide shaming scenes of a broken humanity, the type of which we seem to be able to do nothing about.

2025 was a year of damaging hacks and leaks, in every sense of the word. The digital globe is too complex and widespread to police, so anyone can just surf around pinching data for ransom. I can remember Marks & Spencer's and Land Rover both attacked, and sadly a children's pre-school nursery group too. The criminal records checking system, used to provide safeguarding, was also compromised. That had effects very close to home for some of us here in Haslemere Parish. More recently were the fiascos of the leaky Budget and the usual stresses which surround the England Cricket Team when in Australia. The work of social media and the press just serve to make everything even more painful. So, **I couldn't claim that 2025 has been a year of peace.**

It wasn't in Bethlehem either. When the angels descended upon those shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, the glory of the Lord shone around them, **and they were terrified.** You know the familiar words – all warm and lovely for Christmas time: *'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'*

This is the biblical opener for Christmas day – and the shepherds were the first to know it – albeit in such shocking circumstances. Here is a creation-level moment, a massive breaking-in of divine revelation, where the limits of life are ripped open by God. That shepherd scene is the early equivalent of an Easter time moment when Jesus appeared alive from the tomb – both bring new life upon a human situation which badly needed a new chapter.

And both happened in the nighttime darkness when all around them was supposed to settled and at peace.

‘And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

These nativity things could be thought of as events of the past which have not yet been forgotten – that’s what we call *history*. Like some parts of history, old events might even explain why things are the way they are today. **But the Christian faith does not stake its timeless claims upon old events which happened a long time ago.** The language you will often here clerics use here in churches are of **repeat and return, comings again and such phrases to *bring the gospel of Christ afresh into each new generation*.** The little children dress-up for their nativity plays but the nativity is no period drama being recreated. In our schools, the Christian faith is taught for living. Words fail me to properly articulate, **but I want you to be those shepherds in this day** – still worried in the world (as we all are), yet covered in some glorious light that you cannot provide for yourself – and knowing that today everything can still change for us all, with a glorious breaking of the darkness **to bring a new kind of peace. Those shepherds are you and me.**

And this is the kind of peace which the *world cannot give* – a peace which is *beyond all understanding*. The peace of God is worth **so much more** because here the stresses of humanity are not restricted to being addressed *by our limits* to provide only negotiated or narcotic peace. **It’s much easier to live in the stress when your life is lived on Earth but held in Heaven.**

When Christ came in the nativity, as indeed when he will come from the tomb at Easter time, we find that divine things and human things become one life. **Put it another way – Heaven and Earth are linked.** At Christmas time, heaven comes down to earth with peace, joy and goodwill to all.

A Christian person has access to the peace of God because they live in a place where they will never be separated from God. This is what Christ meant when he kept talking about the Kingdom of God – Heaven and Earth liveable together, and we invited to be within it. **That work of God is to bring the greatest peace which started in a dark field on Christmas Day morning. It's not history – it's your gift today.**

So, the peace which you have here tonight and the peace which awaits you outside in the quiet roads is an anticipation of something which is rather noisy – the rest of your life. Yet this peace is no interlude for a few days of forgetting the often-stressful news of each day, and all to resume next week. **The peace which Christ brings at Christmas is not a palliative for in-between the gaps trouble, but a peace which overlays the traumas of life in a way that nothing else can.**

Amen