**Christmas Eve/Day Sermon 24th / 25th December 2021**

**Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 96, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)**

The time came for Mary 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. If you take a cursory glance on google to find Christmas songs with the words ‘No room’, you will find a quite a number. In fact, I recall as a teenager singing in a choir voicing this very short phrase,

‘No room, only a manger of hay

No room, no room’.

It’s a very common image that is portrayed. Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem for the census only to find that there is ‘no room at the inn’ and therefore, the only place for Mary to bring Jesus into the world was in the place where the animals were, and to lay Jesus in a manger. How often have we seen this scene acted out by children in Nativity plays over the years?

This year in the Parish we read a book by Paula Gooder titled *Journey to the Manger* in which we discovered that lifts the lid on the idea of an Inn in Bethlehem. If you or I were to time travel to Bethlehem in the first century, a small village of some 300 to 400 people (some scholars state up to 1000 inhabitants), would discover that ‘inns’ were places that one visited along the road on the way to another village. In other words, as they travelled some 160 km from Nazareth toward Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary would have encountered such Inns as did the good Samaritan, taking the injured man who had been left for dead on the side of the road. The place Joseph and Mary found themselves would have been a typical house in Israel at the time.

It was also traditional practice in Israel for people to welcome in strangers according to the Law. In fact if one is to look into the old testament, the Torah, you would find over thirty references to taking care of the stranger in the land. Let me read just one reference for you:

‘If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord you God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards you needy neighbour, you should rather open you hand, willingly, lending enough to meet the need , whatever it may be’. Deuteronomy 15:7, 8

Joseph and Mary could in fact knock on a door and be welcomed in. The so-called ‘inn’ may well have been an everyday house, one that was very common in Israel and found also throughout history, in farming communities and villages. The bottom floor housed the animals, the manger, the hay, all things necessary for the supply of those in the house. Upstairs the family would live, sleep, eat etc, gaining warmth from the animals down below. It has been common practice in many communities over the centuries to do so. There was no room upstairs, but there was room for Mary to bring her child into the world in the warmth of the room downstairs, perhaps tucked into the corner of the room where the manger had plenty of hay tucked into it and Mary had a place to lay her newborn with bands of cloth wrapped around him.

It was into this scene that the shepherds would come. Shepherds in and around Bethlehem and Nazareth and Jerusalem were among the poor in Israel. And yet, according to Luke’s gospel they are the first visitors to Jesus. Imagine if you will, shepherds living in the fields around Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flocks, and while they are sitting together, perhaps discussing the events of the day or sitting quietly looking up at the stars of night or just watching over the sheep, an Angel comes and stands among them. The glory of the Lord shone around and they were terrified. If one takes the time to find synonyms of the word terrified, it doesn’t take long to get the sense of what these shepherds felt. They were alarmed, frightened, horrified, perhaps shocked, startled or stunned. One could also say they stood in awe. Angels in the bible often provoked fear in the ones they came to visit. I love the words of the visiting angels in the bible. Their first words are ‘Do not be afraid’. Have you felt such fear where your heart is pumping, the adrenaline is beginning to course through your body and you are sparked into action? I imagine these shepherds would have fended off enemies of the sheep, foxes, wolves and bears, and yet here they are terrified at the sight of an angel.

But we cannot linger here, the Angel of the Lord has come to draw our attention to their higher purpose of visiting the shepherds up on the hills on the outskirts of Bethlehem. We read in the gospel of Luke, ‘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’ These poor shepherds having quite been awestruck by the angel of the Lord are now receiving a grand message! *To you, this day… is born.* The angel brings a very specific message to the shepherds. It is not addressed to Herod, or to some dignitary, prophet, priest, scribe or pharisee. It is a message brought directly to poor shepherds up on a hill overlooking Bethlehem, a message brought at night by an Angel. And the message is specific to these shepherds. Imagine, what a sight that would have been.

The Angel then proceeds to give the shepherds information, where to find the Messiah. ‘*This will be a sign for you: you will find the child wrapped in band of cloth and lying in a manger’* (Luke 2:12). There was no star to follow, no wise guidance from priests or prophets, only the word of the Angel. And then something quite miraculous happens, if an angel visitation is not miraculous enough. *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’.* Then the angels leave, and the shepherds respond saying, ‘*Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us’* (Lk 2: 15). What a wondrous, amazing and spectacular thing to take place up on the hills of Bethlehem. A multitude of angels come praising God before shepherds and somehow they have the capacity to overcome their fear and are moved into action to go find the child laid in a manger in Bethlehem. Have you ever wondered how they found Jesus? Thought about how these shepherds were able to track down the exact location of where Mary and Joseph were housed? It was a small village, and anyone who has lived in a small town knows that word of mouth spreads news quickly! I imagine that the shepherds asked around as they went, where is the babe that has been born? Perhaps they were led by the Holy Spirit as they went ‘with haste’.

And what is it they say when they come and find Mary, Joseph and the child in the manger? Luke’s gospel says in verse 17 and 18 of chapter 2, ‘*they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed what the shepherds told them’.* What had the Angel told them? That ‘*to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord’*  is come. Is it any wonder that Mary treasured all that she heard from the Shepherds that night, pondering them in her heart’. Could you imagine, Mary just a young girl of no more than 12 or 13 hearing such news of her newborn coming from the mouths of poor shepherds? And yet, time and again in the Old Testament God used shepherds to become leaders in Israel. David was a shepherd before he became king as was Solomon and other leaders. The shepherds return to their sheep up on the hill rejoicing and praising God and Mary… she kept in her heart all that she heard from those shepherds. Tonight we celebrate with joy the news that was brought to those shepherds on the hills of Bethlehem, that the Christ Child was born, a message borne by humble shepherds, to a humble dwelling place, where Jesus lay in a manger wrapped in bands of cloth. May we be in awe of the wonder of the song of the angels, *Glory to God in the highest and peace to God’s people on earth.* May we take the message of the angels with us into our hearts and into the new year – good news, good news!