

# **Sermon Christmas Eve: Glory for the Shepherds**

## **Luke 2:1-14**

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At Christmas we hear the beautiful stories of some very special people, the main actors in the story of the birth of Jesus, people like Zachariah, Elisabeth, Joseph, Mary, and the Shepherds.

### **1. Powerful Caesar who commands**

Our Christmas story also introduces some unexpected characters. If it were a TV program, the camera would zoom in on King Herod, Quirinius the governor of Syria, and most of all, on Emperor Augustus, ruler of the Roman Empire.

There is an important reason why Caesar Augustus is mentioned. His troops occupied Israel and the whole Roman Empire and they ruled with a strong hand. Because of this, Israel was quiet and stable. Business was good, and there was stability.

Look at all the good Augustus had done! With a strong hand he kept the peace - there was even an expression for this. It was called, Pax Romana.

Many Romans were so impressed by Augustus that they came to see him as a god. Caesar Augustus was called the son of god, and the Saviour.

The following is part of a text written on one Roman building, 6 years before Jesus was born. A text praising Emperor Augustus:

‘The most divine Caesar [...] has brought our life to the climax of perfection. [...] As Saviour, he has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier

times . So, the birthday of the god (Augustus) has been for the whole world the beginning of good news.'

Yes, he brought stability and peace. But this was only achieved by conquering, by war, by oppression. Peace, thanks to the army. Peace, at the expense of freedom.

This mighty ruler commanded that the people of his empire were to be counted. He commanded. But the Christmas story shows that he was in reality small, and weak, and that politicians do not deserve our devotion.

Augustus commanded a census, and this was exactly what the only God and Saviour, ruler of heaven and earth, wanted him to do. Respect your politicians but do not give them more credit than they deserve.

Our problems and issues cannot be solved by mighty politicians. For a solution to the problems of this world we have to look elsewhere. For real peace we must look to God.

## **2. No room in the inn for Jesus**

The camera then zooms in on Joseph, a simple carpenter, and on Mary his young fiancée, small people in the eyes of the world. If you need a carpenter you go to the market. That is where God went to find the people he needed for the salvation of this world. In the market He found his servants Mary and Joseph.

They came from an unimportant village, Nazareth. They travelled to another small village, Bethlehem. They were far away from the powerful people of the land.

But Joseph and Mary are the true heroes of God. Small, weak, normal people like you and I. But they were faithful to God; and he chose them - as he chooses you.

God drove the world leaders like Augustus to do his will, but when it came to Joseph and Mary, God sent his angels. God does not manipulate his friends. He gives them a free choice. 'Mary, please receive the Saviour. Joseph, please, marry this girl.'

If you feel small, and I think we all feel that regularly, then this is very encouraging.

God's attention is focused on normal people, like you, to accomplish his will on earth. How wonderful! Why would you want to be an Augustus? All the money and power in the world cannot procure a relationship with God. But simple faith and obedience make you God's friend.

Small people like Joseph and Mary are God's heroes. You, faithful believer in Jesus Christ, are God's hero.

Bear in mind, however, the heroes of God do not get very special treatment in this world. Even with baby Jesus in her womb, there was no place in the inn for Mary. She used a manger, where animals usually eat from, as a bed for Jesus.

He was the Son of God, the Saviour. And yet, he was born in a common, simple place. Actually, there was no place for him. And that is how his life was to be. He was to be an outsider, an outcast. Many small people liked him, the rulers hated him.

This was how God brought salvation into the world. Not with guns or battle tanks. With a child. Imagine saying to Caesar Augustus - you are not my god, you are not my saviour, you do not bring us peace.

This baby who sleeps in the straw, he is my God and my saviour and he brings us peace.

The Gospel is not a political message, but it has strong political implications. It puts the rulers of our lands in their proper place. They are strong, very impressive and influential. We need them to organise society. But our help is from God through our Saviour Jesus Christ.

### **3 Shepherds in the field**

Who were the first to hear the great news and to see Jesus? Not the political or spiritual leaders of Israel. It was the shepherds who were the first to welcome Jesus. The camera is now directed at them.

Shepherds were categorically looked down upon in Israel. The pious people of that land, the best people, had an amazing *sharia*, to keep themselves pure before God. These shepherds were unable to keep themselves pure. They had to spend time with the sheep, night and day; they touched the filth of those sheep; they could not do the ritual washings that religion prescribed.

Accordingly, society avoided these men. The shepherds were not even allowed in the temple or in the synagogues. There was no chance for them to meet with God. They could not have peace with God.

Just like many of us, if we look into our hearts, we have to admit: if it depended upon us, we could never meet with God. We are not good enough.

But an angel appeared to those rejected men. And not only an angel, but much more - the glory of God. In the stories of the exodus of Is-

rael out of Egypt we often read about this glory of God. It was the presence of God in his tabernacle, and later, in his temple.

Israel's first temple, that of Solomon where this glory of God rested on the ark of the covenant, had been destroyed. A new temple had been built, and at the time of Jesus, a magnificent temple stood on Mount Zion.

Great! But not really great. Because the glory of God had never appeared again. God kept himself away from the people. Their religion felt dead. Where was God? We need him. We need his presence; we need his peace.

And now, finally, God comes again, as he had promised. His glory is revealed. Not at the temple in Jerusalem, but in the fields of Bethlehem, among the most despised people in the land.

The Gospel is for all people - but God's choice to first reveal Himself to the lowest of the low, is a great encouragement for us. God's message is also for me! We do not need to be particularly nice, sweet, wealthy, religious, or good. God extends his peace to you as well.

God is with you. His message this Christmas is: I have come to you, to renew your life.

This is great news. No wonder the angel tells the shepherds: I proclaim to you a gospel of great joy! That is what we need! Joy.

The birth of Jesus means joy for us, because God came in our midst.

Do you need joy in your life? Go to Jesus. With him in your life, joy can break through the darkness.

The shepherds were overwhelmed by the angel and by the glory of God. As if that was not enough, suddenly there was a whole choir of angels - singing about peace on earth.

The angels are accustomed to peace around the throne of God, peace in heaven. But with the coming of Jesus, joy and peace were also made available for us, on earth, if we bow before his throne.

The Emperor does not bring peace on earth. Peace is only found in Jesus Christ. God alone - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - deserves praise and worship and our full loyalty.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, the camera focuses on us, here and now. Because tonight he promises to be with you as well.

God decided to work through lowly people like Joseph and Mary, and to first bring the good news to the Shepherds. He wants to be with the poor, the weak, the despised. In their midst he showed his glory; in their midst he was born.

How strange that we often try to avoid the poor, the weak, the despised. Who are they here, in our societies? If God would send his angels tonight, where would he announce the Good News?

Let us be with those people. Let us be a blessing to those people. It may be easier to find Jesus in their midst, than with the powerful and the wealthy.

Let us tonight be as humble and obedient as Joseph and Mary and the Shepherds.

The shepherds listened to the message of joy, and then did what God told them to do. They went to the manger and knelt down before Jesus Christ to worship.

Just as we kneel at holy communion: Good people, bad people, very religious, or not so religious, Anglicans, Catholics, Orthodox, Evangelicals, young and old, men and women.

As we kneel tonight, let us envision our Lord – the perfect child of Bethlehem. In bread and wine he offers us joy and peace on earth.

May God give you a peaceful and joyful Christmas.

**Amen**