Fourth Sunday of Advent: Spreading Peace

Scripture – Luke 2:8-20

Key verses – ‘Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”’ (Luke 2:13-14)

Introduction

* All around the world there are people striving for peace. They include Ibrahim Abraham who lives in the Central African Republic, a country which is overwhelmingly controlled by armed groups. By tackling the division in his community, through dialogue, Ibrahim led the leader of one of these armed groups to lay down his weapons and return to civil life (<https://www.c-r.org>). They also include British and Ukrainian schoolchildren singing together for peace a bit closer to home (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-isle-of-man-63011539>).
* Or maybe you are striving for peace in your own home, by choosing to apologise to a spouse or child after an argument, or showing grace to a disgruntled neighbour!
* The message of the angels proclaiming ‘peace on earth’ to the shepherds, and the shepherds’ consequent response, are the first glimpses of Jesus’ birth as the embodiment of peace.

Context

* In a patch of land deep in the bleak Middle Eastern countryside, humble shepherds were guarding their flock in the night (v8). Not only does an angel appear to them, but also the God songs of Heaven could be heard lavishing the night air with pure, celebratory, majestic and powerful sounds.
* What were they celebrating? The angel was a herald sent to announce the birth of Jesus to the world. The army of angels praising God were celebrating this announcement that the Saviour of the world was here, but they were also celebrating what this birth would mean for the world – that peace was coming.
* This is another time in the Advent story that we hear the words ‘Do not be afraid’ (v10). There was something about God’s glory that brought an initial sense of fear, this presence of something bigger and greater that just suddenly erupted into people’s lives and encountered them in a way that would change them for ever.
* While some commentaries affirm that the shepherds symbolise God’s encounter with the marginalised and poor of society, the overall biblical imagery of a shepherd is also mostly positive (Matthew 18:12, John 10:11), and God chose to give this message to hard-working people who were just doing their daily work. This shows us that the gift of Jesus was for everyone.
* Quote:

*‘God is involved not just with the special or the great, but with all people. His announcement of the child’s arrival to everyday folk shows his commitment to the mass of humanity.’* (Captain Gary Lacey)

* In the significance of the shepherds’ encounter with Jesus, verses 17 and 18 can so easily be overlooked. For after seeing Jesus, ‘…they *spread* the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed …’.
* There was something about responding to the angels’ message and finding Jesus (v15) that potentially turned their initial fear into peace and any sense of doubt into faith. This first encounter of the shepherds with Jesus would set the tone for the rest of his ministry, evoking a sense of amazement, a desire to witness to others and personal transformation.

Reflection

* One of the main reasons for the birth of Christ was to bring unbridled peace on earth. Potentially, like the shepherds, so many people don’t even know they need it until they experience it.
* The hearts of the shepherds were touched by the message proclaiming ‘peace on earth’. Life lived in the presence of God not only makes room for peace but also demonstrates this peace through words and actions. Advent helps us look back to the initiation of God’s new movement of peace, and we look forward to the day when peace will reign over the new heavens and the new earth (Revelation 21).
* How can we embrace peace and how we can minister it? Do we long for it? We may talk about it, even sing about it, but do we experience it? What signs do you see of God’s Kingdom of peace breaking into your reality? How can you play a part in God’s great peace movement?

Prayer

Lord, I want to commit to being a peacemaker. I want to commit to spreading the wonderful gift of peace that you brought into this world on a starry night in Bethlehem. Even when I find it hard to be with a person or a situation that causes me much grief, please help me to be the change in that situation. Give strength, Holy Father. In Jesus’ name. Amen.