

## THE NATIVITY of OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST    24 December 2021

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White at St Mark's Church, Bridgewater, Connecticut

*Isaiah 52.7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1.1-4; Luke 2.1-20*

Welcome to this Holy place on this most Holy evening, nearing night. Last year, and over many years before, probably most of us gathered in this room (or in rooms very similar to it) in order to sing the beloved hymns and carols and to hear the prophecies—‘Your God reigns ... and the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God’. And we may also like the later ruminations – ‘God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son’.

Mostly, however, I think that most of us come to hear again the story of the angels and the shepherds and the birth of the child whom no one had expected. We have heard it so many times, and we know it so well, and ... many of us can, perhaps without much prompting, recite it pretty close to word for word: ‘there were shepherds keeping over their flocks by night’ .... We look forward to the story because we know it and it is so comforting, encouraging ....

It is about a birth, a new beginning. A new life begins with so many various and unforeseen possibilities and an unpredictable future that we want to hope can be so bright. New births are about hopes and dreams (and not those of the infant, whose cogitations are limited), before limitations come to into play. We are none of us born perfect, and we are each of us born innocent; and the moment we start to breathe on our own, so much else comes to bear on our futures. At once this world that we inhabit begins to impose restrictions, in various ways to limit us ... to rob us of our innocence. And yet, in the moment, a new life is spectacularly unique and glorious and available to everything.

And probably, on some level, we come on this evening to hear again to hear this story of Hope in a world that seems so ... well, at best challenging .... And, we can come with so much certainty that we already know the familiar story, that ... well, we stop hearing it with new, more seasoned ears .... We may not hear the story with the ears of our lost innocence and our familiarity with the ways of the world, and it is to those ears that St Luke wants to speak.

You see, Luke is not writing a biography of Jesus, nor is he writing a history book: he is writing a theological reflection—a reflection on how God acts in this world that always disabuses the innocent child each of us once was.

For look at what Luke is telling us. The Emperor Augustus—Augustus Caesar, the greatest Emperor of the largest and most powerful empire that Luke's world has ever known—the Emperor Augustus gives an order and, hundreds of miles away, an obscure young couple leave their hometown of Nazareth in Galilee and travel all the way down to the Judean town of Bethlehem which is home to Joseph's people. The most powerful Gentile ruler on earth speaks, and Joseph and the mysteriously pregnant Mary go to Bethlehem where a Jewish prophecy, about a descendant of King David of Israel, foretells that Messiah will be born. Luke is saying that the LORD God

whom the Jews worship is able to work the Holy purposes through the most powerful Gentile on earth.

Jesus, through Joseph, is a descendant of David and he is to be a King, but not a King like David or even Emperor Augustus: his kingdom is a different kind of realm. For, consider his first courtiers—they are shepherds, obscure working men, who are willing to take seriously the message of the angel and the vision of the Heavenly Host and to investigate. Not only is the LORD God of Israel able to work through mighty Gentiles, this God is so powerful as to be unconcerned with what we call power and to seek out not only Caesar but also the lowly—like Mary, Joseph and the shepherds. This God's Son arrives in a stable—he has no permanent home here—and still, he will change the world.

You see, the story that we hear every year on this night is indeed a story of Hope for human beings and their world which does change each time there is a new birth. Any new birth somehow changes this world. The story is also about God, about the vast and unexpected array of human beings God can and will use in order to bring blessings to pass. And the story is about what we human beings can see and learn if, like those more than ordinary shepherd folk, we are willing to be amazed and to believe that God loves and seeks to bless the world in ways that we can notice.

And so, I wish you, each of you, a Christmastide of hope in the powers of God to work changes in each of us and in our world, and a Christmastide of willingness to keep open our ears, eyes, minds, and hearts. Amen.