

Midnight Communion

24–25th December 2024

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I guess that, for most of us, it is very far from being the first time that we heard the story that Sue just read to us from the Gospel of Luke: the census, the newborn child laid in a manger, the shepherds on the hillside, and the heavenly host.

To be honest, I find it so familiar that it is hard really to *listen* to it, and even harder to find anything interesting to *say* about it. But there are still things that can give you a little mental jolt as you listen – make you sit up and take notice again.

For me, this time round, there was something about

the English translation we were using,
and the way it differed from the most familiar form of the words.

If Sue had been reading from
the King James Version of the Bible -
that most famous of all English translations
produced all the way back in the seventeenth century
but still used in many contexts today
especially around Christmas time -

well, in that version the Angels would have said
'Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace, good will toward men.'

But that's not what Sue read out tonight.

The words that she read out were subtly different.

That is not in itself surprising;

after all, the Gospel of Luke wasn't originally written in English,
not even in the English of the seventeenth century.

It was written in Greek,

and it can be translated into English in more than one way.

And more recent translators have tended to think that,

instead of ‘good will towards men’,

the relevant phrase in the original means something like

‘those towards whom good will is shown’.

So we did not hear ‘on earth peace, good will toward men’

but, ‘on earth peace among **those whom he favours!**’ –

that is ‘peace among those to whom God shows good will.

I know, I know – it is far too late for

a lecture on the translation of the New Testament.

It would probably have been too late several hours ago,

and it is certainly too late now,

but I mention this because

when I read or hear the modern version –

‘on earth peace among those whom he favours’ –

I must admit that it jars a little.

Not just because the words are not quite the familiar ones,

but because something about the sentiment expressed jars.

Peace, yes – but *only* for those whom God favours,

only for the chosen,

only for the special.

These angels bring good news for *some*,

but not really for everyone -

not, in particular, for those whom God does *not* favour.

You could say that this wording conjures up a picture of God

making a list, and checking it twice -

a list, perhaps, of who is naughty and who's nice...

and if you're on the wrong side of that list,

- well, then, *no good news for you!*

No peace,

no invitation to the stable in Bethlehem,

no singing along with the heavenly host.

But that's not the picture we should have in our minds at all.

Before starting on this heavenly song

the angel had said to the shepherds:

'Do not be afraid; for see -

I am bringing you good news of great joy *for all the people*'.

Good news for *all*.

Great joy for *all*.

And so, yes, *peace* for all.

You could think of another famous Bible verse, John 3.16:

‘For God so loved *the world* that he gave his only son’.

Why was Jesus born?

Why was the Son of God present in that manger?

Why were the angels singing out to the shepherds?

Because God so loved *the world*.

God so loved the *whole* world;

God so loved all the people in it:

the naughty, the nice, and the indifferent;

the just, the unjust, and the bewildered;

kings and shepherds, and everyone in between.

Those are the ones - all of them, every last one of them -

they are *all* the ones whom God favours.

They are *all* the intended recipients of God's good gift.

You are all the intended recipients.

We are all the intended recipients.

The message of Christmas -

in fact, the message of Christianity -

isn't - or at least it *shouldn't* be -

a message of reward *for those who are good enough*,

reward for those who make the grade,

who make it onto the list,

those who have somehow managed to be

in special favour with God.

No. It's a message of *grace* -

which means a message about a free gift,

a gift given to the undeserving,

especially to the underserving,

a gift given with no preconditions, no entry requirements.

Whatever you think of yourself,

however worthy or worthless you feel,

whatever value, high or low,

you would put on your own life and actions,
however low your self-esteem,
however much you have let people down and let yourself down,
however much you wish you were different,
however disappointed or ashamed you feel,
however little you think you count in this world -
this gift is for you. It is intended for you. It is *meant* for you.

In fact, it is a gift given *first* to those who might think
that they deserve it least;

first to the unclean shepherds out on the hills,

first to the despised and rejected,

first to the ashamed and the disappointed,

first to the weak and the overlooked.

Whoever you are, whatever you have done,
whatever your past, whatever your present,
what happened in that stable,
in the time when Quirinius was governor
and Augustus was Caesar -
it happened for *you*.

God wanted and wants a relationship with *you*;

God wanted and wants *you* to know that

you are part of God's family;

God wanted and wants *you* to know peace;

God wanted and wants *you* - and everyone - to know great joy.

What the shepherds went to Jerusalem to see was new life,

the new life of a baby in a manger, yes,

but also the life of God shared with the world,

they went to see new life that God wanted to share with *them*

and then with all the people,

a life that God was inviting them to join,

and to enjoy, and to delight in.

And that life, that gift, that extravagant act of sheer grace

is for *everyone*.

Happy Christmas!