

Christmas 1 2017

Luke's story of the shepherds visiting the baby Jesus in his manger is all about one of the big theme in his gospel that Jesus is on the side of the poor and powerless.

Here at Jesus' birth the first people to come and see him are shepherds who were viewed as lower class in first century Palestinian society. At his resurrection the first people to see him alive will be a group of women who then were seen as second class to men. Luke is always putting poor and powerless people at the heart of his story about Jesus.

Where Luke has shepherds visiting the baby, Matthew has Magi, important religious figures who appear to have instant access to the ruling authorities, in this case King Herod. The visit of the Magi is full of symbolism about the true nature of kingship and power. The visit of the shepherds always seems somewhat more realistic - a real spontaneous response by a group of ordinary people to an event which they grasp is going to change the world for them.

Luke throughout his gospel is much more concerned with Jesus' impact on ordinary people than the powers that be. This is not to say that he is unconcerned about power relations in society and in particular the relationship between rich and poor, the powerful and powerless.

On the contrary Luke is, for example, much more interested, than say Matthew, in Jesus' political teaching about poverty and oppression. Matthew does record Jesus speaking about these things but he tends to see Jesus speaking of them in spiritual rather than physical terms. When Luke speaks of poor people he means people who don't have a lot of money. When Matthew speaks of poor people he means people who are spiritually impoverished. Of course this exaggerates the difference in perspective because Luke knows that people who are financially poor are less likely to have time for spiritual things and Matthew knows that those who are financially wealthy are going to have greater problems with Jesus' spiritual demand to give up everything in order to follow him. But in general Luke sees Jesus as 'biased towards the physically poor' whereas Matthew seems to see this less clearly.

This difference in perspective of the two gospel writers is reflected in the debate about Jesus' teaching that has echoed down the ages. Is the good news for

everyone or is it only for those who God has special regard for.

The gospel reading, as well as recording the visit of the shepherds, also records the circumcision of Jesus. We are now fairly used to the idea espoused by Paul in his letter to the Galatians that 'There is no Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' – even if it has taken nearly two thousand years for us to take this on board. But does this mean that God has no special favourites anymore? Isn't he biased towards the poor and powerless? Does he not have special regard for these people?

I would suggest that the good news of the gospel is good news precisely because Jesus has come primarily, as he himself claimed at the very start of his ministry,

'to preach good news to the poor proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed'

This isn't good news for the rich and powerful. It's not even saying 'I have come to warn the wealthy oppressors that they better change their ways. It's arguing that what he says and does will have a direct impact on marginalised, poor and powerless people like the shepherds that night in the fields outside Bethlehem regardless of what establishment, rich and powerful people do.

Archbishop Rowan Williams once wrote;

*"Faced with the hardship that quite clearly lies ahead for so many in the wake of financial crisis and public spending cuts, how far are we able to sustain a living sense of loyalty to each other, a real willingness to bear the load together? How eager are we to find some spot where we feel safe from the pressures that are crippling and terrifying others? As has more than once been said, we can and will as a society bear hardship if we are confident that it is being fairly shared; and we shall have that confidence only if there are signs that everyone is committed to their neighbour, that no-one is just forgotten, that no interest group or pressure group is able to opt out."*

Rowan Williams is urging a greater sharing of what we have and a greater commitment to our neighbour. Jesus says much the same thing later in his ministry (the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 and the parable of the Good Samaritan spring to mind). And we rich do need to be reminded of these things. But where is 'the good news for the poor'? Isn't Rowan William's just saying

that if we rich and powerful don't help build the Big Society then the poor and powerless will suffer.

Jesus came as a baby to turn the world upside down. 'Blessed are you that hunger now for you shall be satisfied,' he said. Poor people like the shepherds believed him and came to worship him. But perhaps we Christians, in 2018, should resolve to be more overtly revolutionary and that we as a church should be clearer that we bring good news to the poor. Luke says that the shepherds left the 'stable' 'glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen'. It would be good if a few more people were able to do that today knowing that they were being treated fairly and openly in society.

Hopefully, in 2018, we as a society will become more aware of the growing gaps that are appearing that are in danger of making us the very opposite of what we are- a United Kingdom.

I would like to wish you all a very happy and prosperous New Year.

Amen.