

Luke 2:1-4, 8-20

Christmas Day 2018

*Those days / this day*

One of the intriguing features of the Christmas Story is the contrasts, the tensions that we find woven into it. So, for example, there is the contrast between Caesar Augustus, the mighty Roman Emperor who is name-checked at the beginning of our reading, and the tiny baby in the manger who is presented as the true ruler; and if we include the other account of Jesus' birth in Matthew's Gospel we find the contrast between the shepherds - common, coarse everyday people, and the wise men, learned people of status and class; and there is too the contrast between Jerusalem, the capital city boasting its mighty temple and little lowly Bethlehem whose claim to fame will centre on a manger in a humble stable. It is out of these contrasts, these tensions that the story of Jesus' birth emerges.

There is, though another tension written into the account that we need to note, the contrast between 'those days' and 'this day', and let me explain. Our chapter begins, 'In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered...' In other words, 'in those days' an imperial decree went out from the very citadels of power, and of course empires live by decrees. They enforce their rule by decrees, proclamations, laws, statutes that say, 'this is how things shall be!' And of course the people of the Empire, if they know what is good for them, obey the decrees and do as their told, for ultimately they fear the consequences of resistance and disobedience. And it's that word 'fear' that is crucial: empires enforce their rule by fear – by stoking fear of reprisal and retribution to those who refuse, but also by stoking fear of scarcity and deprivation, by stoking fear of 'the other' and the different and the refugee and those in flight. Now, some of you, I expect' have seen the scurrilous film 'Life of Brian', set 'in those days' of Jesus and Augustus, where the question on the lips of the revolutionaries is, 'what have the Romans ever done for us?' And of course the answer is – well, the roads, the aqueducts, the infrastructure etc etc: in other words, not everything about Roman rule was bad. But nonetheless there were soldiers at every street corner, and there were public executions with thousands hanging from crosses to remind people of the penalty of rebellion. So, 'in those days' the fearful shadow of the empire hung over everyday life and kept people in order. This was a closed world, a world where hopes of change and of liberation were shut down and where horizons were narrow and blocked.

Then, however, we read on in our passage from 'in those days' and we find the words 'this day': the angel appears to the shepherds and says, 'to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.' In other words into 'those days' - into 'those days' of fear and captivity there is inserted 'this day' – a new regime, a new rule, a day of release and liberation! Out-with the heavily fortified,

heavily armed, heavily defended citadels of empire there is in this manger in this stable the stirrings of something new. And suddenly the world is no longer shut down and closed-in and bounded by the grip of the empire. No, the world is open to heaven for suddenly the dark skies are parted and the angelic host is sighted and the things of heaven are found here on earth. And the focus of it all, the centre, is this baby whose rule has come and in whom earth is open to heaven and heaven to earth, and suddenly the shut-down world is prised open to new possibility, new horizons, new life. 'This day' has come and with it the Saviour, the Messiah, and now, suddenly, 'in those days' is old news – yes, let's say it, it's 'fake news' - for things have changed and from 'this day' forth nothing will ever be the same.

'In those days' – an empire whose hallmark is fear. 'This day' - a kingdom that over-rides the fear with hope. And what of 'our day', today? What will future commentators say of Christmas 2018? They will say that 'in those days' the United States of America was in government shut-down; and 'in those days' the British government and nation were facing the abyss; and 'in those days' international treaties and protocols were being torn up; and 'in those days' huge migrations of people were set in motion by fear of death and destruction; and 'in those days' it was realised that human life on earth was rapidly becoming ecologically unsustainable. 'In those days...' Well, as Christians, today, on Christmas Day, we say, 'this day in the city of David, a Saviour has been born'. This day, in this little baby, heaven has invaded earth, and earth has welcomed him in the figures of the shepherds and the wise men. The world is no longer in lock-down. The check-point between heaven and earth has been cast aside. Soldiers maybe stationed in city streets but angels are stationed out in the fields. And it all amounts to the good news of Emmanuel, God with us. Celebrate it today – and celebrate 'this day' every day. Amen.