

The Incarnation Part 7 - 'The Angel'

by Charles Alexander

The sermon explores the significance of the angel's announcement to the shepherds of Jesus' birth, and the great joy that He brings to the world through His humility and sacrifice.

Scripture: Genesis 3:15, Psalm 121:4, Isaiah 40:11, Luke 2:9, John 16:22, John 20:20, Romans 6:8, Hebrews 12:2, 1 Peter 5:4

Topics: "Incarnation Of Christ", "Divine Humility"

Description

Charles Alexander preaches on the profound significance of the angelic announcement of the Lord's birth to the shepherds, emphasizing the divine inspiration of the Word that continually reveals fresh insights. He delves into the symbolism of the shepherds being chosen to receive the message, representing the Chief Shepherd, Jesus, who was born that night. The sermon highlights the humility and exaltation of Christ, born in a manger for the salvation of all people, bringing great joy and eternal hope to humanity.

Transcript

Luke 2:9-10 : And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people'.

This wonderful story of the announcement of the Lord's birth to the shepherds in the Judaeian countryside, two thousand years ago, has been familiar to all of us, probably from childhood. And yet, there is always much to be brought out of it which is fresh. One of the hallmarks of divine inspiration of the Word is that things which are old are ever new. We may go over these accounts again and again, and will always find something extra which we had never noticed before. Lancelot Andrews, a contemporary of King James 1st, was a great man who made some outstanding remarks. He was an eminent preacher, the like of whom we could do with in our pulpits today. He said before King James, on an occasion when he was preaching upon this passage, that the angels at that time of night had nobody else to pass on their message to, so they had to hand it out to a few shepherds on the hillside. Undoubtedly, this would be one of the few things that we would disagree with Lancelot Andrews about. Possibly, he said it a little "tongue in cheek" to liven up the King, sitting in a pew in front of him. Later in his sermon he did comment that it may be that there was some special significance about the shepherds too. Certainly, it would hardly be true that the angel addressed the shepherds for the only reason that there was nobody abroad at that hour of night, except shepherds who were watching over their flocks to keep the wild beasts away and to see

that their sheep did not stray in the darkness. When Lancelot Andrews became rather serious on the matter, he certainly touched the real point of the shepherds being addressed by the angel, and nobody else that night. That is because the Chief Shepherd, the Shepherd of the shepherds, was being born that night, of the seed of David the shepherd King in fulfilment of the promises made in the prophecies of Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah and elsewhere.

Isaiah (40:11) says, He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young. In so many of the prophets, this certain character of the Lord is prophesied. To whom else, therefore, would the angels sing their song and make their proclamation, but to the shepherds of Israel. Here we have a type of those who would carry the message, by day and by night, so they would always be awake. There would always be those shepherds who, in the hours of darkness, would be watching over the sheep, the Lord's sheep: in fervent prayer and thanksgiving, in earnest intercession, in all that typifies a pastor's attentiveness, keeping watch when everybody else is asleep. That is what the Lord does over His great flock; He never sleeps. As the Word (Psalm 121:4) says, He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. So the shepherds were awake; And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people'. It is surprising how apprehensive we are of the unseen world; that we shrink if there is anything happening that seems to suggest a power beyond the visible! People with vivid imaginations have suffered from this kind of thing, and it is always a matter of dread, not of delight, when again and again in the Bible we find that an angel has appeared to men, in great power and glory, and that the poor human beings have been unable to withstand the sight, and fall down in great fear and trembling. This is so, even though they be people like Daniel, who was very much in conversation with heaven, with divine things. When the angel appeared to him, he fell down as one dead; there was no more energy in him at all, until the strengthening hand of the angel was laid upon him. The angel said (Daniel 10:19), O man greatly beloved, fear not: peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong; so he was lifted up, received strength and stood trembling before this apparition.

So it was with these shepherds, when the glory of the Lord shone round about them. Did they rejoice? No, they were much afraid: "sore afraid"; and you and I would have been too, because we are not fitted for that kind of faith. We have been made by the hand of God in so delicate a way, so limited and so restricted a way, that the mere confrontation of divine persons, angelic beings, is likely to throw us down into an unconscious state, or a condition of great trembling and fear. So the angel says, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Nobody was ever afraid to look upon a baby. Who would be afraid of a newborn babe? This is what the angel came to announce. While they were still wondering at the angel's word, suddenly the whole heaven was opened to them; and a multitude of the heavenly host stood beside the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Let us imagine that the words had been spoken to us, as if we had been with the shepherds, and trembled with them, and heard the angel say, "Fear not; I bring you good tidings of great joy." The Greek word "evangel" and the Anglo Saxon word "gospel" mean precisely the same thing: the good word, the good message, glad tidings, good tidings, good news. When you hear about people preaching the gospel, it means they are preaching the "good news", the good news of salvation, the good news of the divine

mercy: that God has visited the earth, that He became man, that He has lived amongst us, that he has done marvellous works, that he was condemned to die, suffered upon the cross for our redemption, and rose again from the dead to overcome death. This is good news, dear friends; it was good news for the shepherds abiding in the fields. And this is the first instance that we have of angels preaching the gospel. It is not given to angels normally to do this. It happened only once, preliminary to the great gospel being historically fulfilled in our Saviour Jesus Christ. This was the beginning of it; He who died for our sins had first of all to be born. "Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy (the gospel), which shall be to all people." This was truly a great announcement!

This is not the first time that the gospel had been preached; the Lord God Almighty Himself was the first to preach the gospel, when He preached it to our first parents, in the garden of Eden, after they had sinned and stood trembling before Him, waiting for the sentence that He was going to pronounce upon them. This is what He said in their hearing, as He addressed the serpent who was tempting them (Genesis 3:15) : I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. We all know that this was a promise of the gospel, which was made right at the dawn of the human race; and around that sentence, which God pronounced upon the serpent, were gathered all the hopes of our humanity, and we are still dependent on the fulfilment of that promise, because "the seed" was born of the virgin Mary, conceived not of an earthly father, but by the Holy Ghost. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour." Notice that the angel was very correct in what he said, when he was announcing this fulfilment of the original promise about the seed of the woman, who should appear to contend on our behalf with the serpent, and with sin and with death, and should overthrow that which has overthrown us, and bring us back again into the favour of God: higher yet into the rank and title of princes of the eternal world; partners with the Saviour on His eternal throne; the people of God.

Now the angel was very particular. He said, "Unto you is born this day." He might have said, "Unto the virgin Mary is born this day in the city of David..." He was telling the shepherds that this child is born for them, for their sake, which is quite remarkable. And it is addressed to each one of us. Unto us was born this child, for us, on our behalf. We have as much interest in that babe today as the virgin Mary had that night. It was for her because she needed a Saviour, like everybody else, but it was not just for her. We have an equal stake in Christ, in the birth of that child. He belongs to us just as much as He ever belonged to the virgin Mary. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord"; for God saw each one of us in our need, and He saw that we needed a Saviour. Unto you is born this day in the city of David (that is Bethlehem) a Saviour which is Christ the Lord. The angel probably spoke in Hebrew, rather than Greek, and the word he used was more likely to be "Messiah" than "Christ". The shepherds knew exactly what that meant because all Israel waited for their Messiah to come. They did not all wait for Him in the right way. These shepherds did; but the priests, the Pharisees and the scribes of Israel, for the most part, looked for another kind of Messiah. They expected one born in a king's palace, one who would lead them forth with their armies and overcame all their enemies, making Israel the principal nation. To be the leading nation on earth is what they looked for.

They did not look for a babe who was born in such a wonderful way as this. There was no room in the inn, so the poor expectant mother was turned away from the door and pointed to the stable where she would find a heap of straw upon which to lie. There she went with Joseph, and no doubt he spread a garment upon the straw for her. She lay down there amongst the beasts of the stall, and she brought forth her first born son and called His name Jesus, the name which was given by the angel when His birth was

announced some months before. She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in the manger from which the beasts obtained their food. This is the remarkable thing; all glory belonged to Him, but He did not leave Heaven simply to take up some earthly glory. Some people think that is precisely what He has done, and what He is going to do. But that is not what we believe; we do not believe in any kingdom on earth at all. We do not believe that the Lord is coming a second time to set up a kingdom and a throne upon earth; that He is going to leave a Heavenly throne for an earthly throne. We believe He is coming a second time, but He is coming again to sweep all this world, all this Creation as we now know it, away into oblivion. It will never be needed any more; it will have completed its purpose. We shall all stand before the eternal throne in an eternal state: before the One to whom all glory belongs. It would have been no glory for Him to be born in any distinctive way upon the earth; and so it pleased Him who had laid His glory by, that He might take it again, with the utmost credit, after He had completed His work. It pleased Him to become the lowest of the low, the meanest of all; and, when His birth was imminent, that His mother should be refused an entrance, be turned aside into a stable, there to find a place amongst the beasts of the stall. And the only cradle that could be found to put the little one in was the manger from which the beasts took their fodder. The angel said, This shall be a sign unto you (that Christ the Lord has appeared). Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Not once in a thousand ages would you find a birth like this. Not once in a thousand ages would you be likely to find a king born in such circumstances as these. We do not know of any other baby in history who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger at the moment of His birth.

Children have often been born in hapless circumstances. The preacher knew a man in Scotland who, as a newly-born baby, was found in a garret room near to death, in an old orange crate, without any care having been lavished on him at all. No-one knew his name, and no-one knew who his parents were. Yes, people have been born in very strange circumstances, but nothing could be lower than this: wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, because there was no room in the inn. It is not that His parents were as poor as all that. They had come on an excursion from Galilee, and had been on a three day journey. They had to go because of the census which was proclaimed by the Roman Caesar. They had to be there, every man in his own city, to be enrolled by the officials of the Roman Empire. They were living up in the province of Galilee, but they did not belong there, and had to go where they belonged. Joseph was a tradesman and he had money. He was not a poor man; He was not destitute; it is simply that there was no room for them. They could not even buy a room because the place was full up due to the census and the enrolment which was taking place. The humility of our Lord is extraordinary, and He was born for each one of us. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." And despite this, "You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

As He began so He continued. He was amongst the poor, the meek and the lowly, because it was for them that He came. As He was meek and lowly, so must we be. We must be ready to be saved on His terms, not on ours, and live the life He gives us to live; not the one we choose, but the one He has chosen for us, because He knows best. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

Now these are "good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." They are tidings of great joy, calculated to fill with joy the heart of everybody who is rightly disposed to the receiving of this message. Why should these words be used: "tidings of great joy"? What is there of great joy about this message which the angels brought? It is great joy first of all because of the person who was born for us. Who was He? Who is He? Where did He come from? Was this His origin in the manger bed? No, it was not! His origin was the throne of God; His origin was the bosom of the Eternal Father; He was the Eternal God.

"Unto you is born this day in the city of David," One who is the Eternal God, but you will not see Him as such. You will see Him as a "babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger," and you just have to believe it. You must believe it when you are rightly minded; it is easier to believe it that way than if you heard He was born in a king's palace with all the riches of the nation at His disposal, beautifully robed as only the king's son would be, robed as the prince of the royal palace, as the heir to the throne.

But "wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger"; this is different and yet "great joy", because of who He is: the glorious, eternal God. Some may say that He is not "God", but "the Son of God". Well, the Son of God is, of course, God! That which comes forth from God, before all creation, is uncreated. That which is uncreated, and yet is, is God. There is no-one else who is uncreated but God; and if the Son is uncreated and yet begotten, then He had no origin in time. He always was with the Father, and therefore He is God, for that which comes forth uncreated from the bosom of the Father is God. God can only bring forth God in that timeless, uncreated state, before all worlds were made. This is the one who was born of Mary, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger; and this is the reason why great joy should be unconfined, because He came not for judgment, but for salvation and mercy. He came for you and for me. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." The message of the angel is for all the world to hear and to take notice of: "I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

Not only is there great joy because of who He is; there is great joy in the message pronounced by the angels, because of that for which He came, and the immeasurable results which were going to flow from His coming. Why did He come? He came for our salvation, for the forgiveness of our sin. He came to take our part, because there was nobody else who could do it. God might have sent a created angel, but the angel could not do it because the angel is responsible to God for his own obedience, and he cannot therefore be made responsible for ours.

There are sects going round, people who knock at your door, who will tell you that Jesus Christ was only a very exalted angel; a kind of lord of the angels. If this were the case He would be of little or no use to us because an angel, no matter how elevated, cannot take away our sins, cannot destroy death. He is responsible for himself before God, and therefore he can be responsible for no-one else but himself; he has no righteousness to impart to others. The only one who can save your soul is the One who is under no obligation to render righteousness on His own behalf, because He Himself is righteousness.

Now if He comes down who is the Eternal God, then He can take our part, but no-one else. The "good tidings of great joy" are so great and so joyful because of the cause for which He came. We have a most exalted person to take up our case, to represent us in the eternal court of justice. The Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. He appears in the courts as the one who is appointed, not just to plead for you, but to take your place, to take your place in condemnation upon the tree, to be crucified for you, that you might be crucified with Him, and nevertheless live.

As the apostle Paul says; "Yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." The angel said, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." There are, evidently, degrees of joy; there is joy, there is greater joy, and there is great joy. What the angel is talking about is supreme joy, with which no other joy can compare; it is an eternal joy, the joy of God Himself. Did you know that God was a joyful being? He is, because He is a God of love.

He is love, and where there is love there is joy, and no-where else; not really, not lasting joy; not real joy. The angel speaks of great joy, because this is the supreme level of joy. There is nothing which thrills the soul of the renewed and forgiven child of God so much as the great joy of heaven. We read in Hebrews 12:2 that Jesus "for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame." Before He left them, Jesus bestowed His joy upon the disciples, promising them that, like His peace, it would never be taken away.

He promises them joy and peace; they enter into the joy of their Lord. God is a joyful being; there is nothing in God but joy. You may say, "What about the wrath of God?" You must understand that the wrath of God is only an aspect of His eternal love. That may appear to be a contradiction. Of course it is, in your ears and mine, but not in God's; that which seems to contradict is not contradicted in God. In the depths of His being there is just one thing, and that is love; joy, peace, light, life and love are His.

"I bring you good tidings of great joy." Everybody is seeking joy and happiness in this world, but there is no joy outside the will of God, and apart from fellowship with Him. Jesus told the disciples, before He went to the cross, that He would see them again, that their hearts would rejoice, and that no-one would take their joy from them. They would rejoice because death would yield up its victim. He would die upon the cross, and the third day He would rise again, and death would have no more dominion over Him. When they should see Him and know Him again, oh what rejoicing!

The Saviour came back, and the joy of the disciples was complete when they saw Him. Your heart shall rejoice, and your joy shall no-one take from you. One has come back from the dead, and death hath no more dominion over Him. In fellowship of heart with Him, by faith in His atoning work and in His promises, you and I shall live for ever. Let us, therefore, think carefully of this message of the angel, giving it its due weight and consideration: "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

Amen

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