

Not your average birth at all

May the joy of Jesus' birth bring you peace and hope. A blessed Christmas to each one of you!

We know the story or at least we've heard it so many times, sung it so often, seen it in so many nativity scenes, posted so many Christmas cards yet for those who pause again and listen it is there – old yet new and fresh – as God acts in a special way in the birth of Jesus.

This is not your average story of a birth in the Bethlehem General Hospital with family and friends coming along afterwards to celebrate and toast the new baby. No pethadine, no gas, no epidural blocs, no midwives, no doctors, no clean sterile environment. Just two people – without lodgings and apparently with no family to call on or who had family but who wouldn't help – maybe because of some scandal – just two people and their baby. No vitamin K injection, no apgar rating, just a young girl and her betrothed wrapping the new born son in strips of cloth and putting him down in a manger.

Now, I'm sure that there have been millions of other births in poor conditions and I'm sure that there have been many births in worse conditions. Yet the birth of Jesus is remembered and celebrated each year throughout the world. Here, Christmas is even celebrated by folk who don't know the reason for the season.

And like so many things it is the explanation that gives meaning. Back then the explanation regarding this rather lonely birth was first given by a solitary angel.

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

To a people occupied by a foreign country, hoping for God to send his chosen One, the Messiah, this is good news indeed. This is a joyful message, good news! Peace at last! And the sign of this great event?

¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby [which makes sense if he's just been born] wrapped in cloths [that was a common enough practice – not all that unusual so far] and lying in a manger.” [Whoa! What's that? Where?] It's a strange sign that the Saviour of the world has a feed trough for his cradle!

And with the angel came a great army of the angelic host. And we have another strange event – besides that of angels themselves – for we find that God's angelic army (that's what the 'heavenly host' is all about) sings praises to God for the peace God is making with those on earth. We'd expect an army to sing a battle song, a war cry, a cry of victory but praises for peace?! This is not your average birth here!

No wonder the shepherds want to check this out! And so off they go and find it as the angel had told them and they were not afraid of sharing the Good News. God has sent us a Saviour!

And we come to another strange event in this birth. It was shepherds were shared the good oil about this birth. However, in Jewish society shepherds and indeed all herdsmen were regarded as disreputable and often their evidence was not accepted in a court of law. In other words generally you didn't believe them – especially if they usually told you that they had some ugg boots, lamb chops, or sheep skin coats at the best prices you could imagine! Yet God sent the angelic messenger to the shepherds and not to the priests, the Pharisees, Herod and the royal family, or the rich and famous.

The more you ponder this birth the stranger it becomes. This baby Jesus lying in a manger is surrounded by wood. The wood of the manger holds him firm and safe and secure. At the end of his

life this Jesus was also surrounded by wood. This time he was held fast to the wood and not so that he could be safe and secure but so that you can be safe and secure before God.

Christmas only makes sense when behind every manger stands a cross. For the last 150 years or so, Christmas is in danger of being sanitized into a sickly, sweet, sentimental time of love and good will towards others; a festival without a meaning; or a festival that has had its meaning changed to one that is more palatable such as you and I being nice and kind to others and trying to be like that the rest of the year.

But Christmas isn't a social tonic or moral pick-me-up. Christmas is an event and a message. Christmas is about love. God's love for you. And it doesn't matter who you are – Christmas is about God's love for us all.

This love is not a marshmallow love – soft and sweet and easily forgotten in the real world. It's a gutsy love. God comes as one of us and lies in a manger. God's warrior angels sing his glory and praise God for the peace extended to all people – even to shepherds – even to you and me. Christmas is the beginning of the time when God personally walked on earth on a path that only leads to a cross. No cross, no Christmas, no love.

We may respond with presents – that can be good – but we also can respond with words and lives that have been touched by Immanuel. We celebrate Christmas because of the empty tomb – and we can also treasure things in our hearts – gospel, baptism, bread and wine – and grow in our relationship with Immanuel. And we can also go out with the same fervour and dedication that we've shown towards our Christmas shopping and preparations with a message to the world. Like the shepherds, we can also tell the world of what we've heard and seen.

God has made peace with sinners, forgiven us, and given us a new birth, a new life. Those presents are available every day of the year and God whispers, speaks, and shouts into our lives – I do love you – live with me!