

This evening we heard again

The message of the angels to the shepherds:

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

But what does it mean for God to be glorified?

What does it mean to talk about 'God' for that matter?

Let's start tonight by thinking about the word 'God'

And how we can use this word

To understand our own lives.

Of course, the word 'God' can mean many things to many people.

But in the Lutheran tradition we have a particular way

Of understanding what it means to have a god.

If you're philosophically minded,

You could call it an existential definition:

It's a simple but illuminating definition, and here it is:

A god is whatever we put our trust in

And whatever we fear losing most.

By this definition, we all have a god,

We all have something that is at the centre of our lives

And that, more than anything else,

Drives what we daydream about, how we spend our time,

How we shape our sexual relationships, family life, and friendships,

What we choose to study or where we choose to work...

A case could be made that the most common god by this definition

Is Mammon: that is, money and possessions.

But a god by this definition could be all sorts of other things:

Bodily pleasure, patriotism, family, virtue, political ideology...

You name it.

The things is, are any of these gods the real God?

Can any of these things bring creation into being out of nothing?

Or call the dead back into life?

Or forgive sins and bring lasting reconciliation?
Although these 'small g' gods can be very powerful in our lives
And in our society, and although they can drive us
Into all sorts of thoughts and words and actions,
They can never bring us real peace,
And they cannot save us from our true enemies,
Including that great enemy, death.

Tonight I'm proclaiming Good News:
The true God, the one beyond creation,
Who called into being all that there is,
The true God, the one who can bring the dead back to life,
Who forgives sins, who brings lasting reconciliation,
This God has revealed who he is,
Not in complex ideas or formulas,
But in human flesh and blood:
In the little baby, Jesus,
Born of Mary, wrapped in bands of cloth,
And laid in a feeding trough for animals.

Let's listen to the reading: **While [Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem,] the time came for [Mary] to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.**

On the one hand Jesus' birth is special and unrepeatable:
In the Scriptures we learn that Jesus is the descendant
Of the great king, David:
God had promised David that his Son would rule forever,
And in the birth of Jesus this promise is being fulfilled.
We learn also that Jesus was born of the *virgin* Mary,
That there was something deeply mysterious about his conception,
And that he came into being as no other human.

And yet, with all this,

There is something confounding about Jesus' birth:
He is not born in a royal palace, let alone comfortable circumstances.
Rather he is born in obscurity: in a small outpost of a great empire.
More than this, God in the flesh is born in a situation of need:
The one through whom all things came into being,
Whose hands, we could say, flung stars into space,
Is given the restricting comfort of bands of cloth –
And is there anything more tender and helpless than a little baby
Seeking the womb-like comfort of swaddling cloths?

What's more the message of his birth is not first proclaimed
To the rich or the powerful or the talented or the intelligent
But to those on the margins of society: to the shepherds
Who, as we would say, lived rough, out in the open,
Who did not have education or wealth or influence.

This, in fact, is what we read: **In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.**

The shepherds were far from the temple and from the synagogue.
They were doing work that needed to be done,
But that was at the bottom of the social hierarchy.
And yet it is to the Shepherds that God's message
Is about to be revealed.

Note, by the way, that the shepherds were terrified.
This is the common reaction in the Bible to all people,
Whoever they are, of whatever class, when they come into contact
With the numinous, with the unworldly.
According to our nature we do fear the unfamiliar,
Especially if it is beyond our ability to control or understand,
Especially if we feel we cannot escape.
And this is indeed what the real God is like:
Uncontrollable by human beings, beyond our imaginations,

Inescapable: the real God is the one to whom all must give an account:
We know this in our consciences,
However much the small g gods try to shout down the voice.

And yet the true God does not come to condemn or to destroy,
But to bring light and life.

This is how the reading goes on: **But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.**

The message that the angel has is one of joy:
That the Messiah, that is, the true Son of David,
Through whom God will bring his justice, his mercy, his peace,
Is born in the town of David, in Bethlehem.

Notice that the angels says, **‘To you is born...’**
To know Christ is not simply to know about him,
But to know his benefits,
To know what he has done for you.
Jesus, whose name means ‘The Lord Saves’
Is born for the people, for you.

It’s then that the angel takes this great announcement
Of what God is doing to bring the world to rights,
And directs the attention of the Shepherds,
Of those on the very margins of society,
To a flesh and blood newly born baby:

The angels says: **This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’**

To see your God, the true God,
Go to Bethlehem, find the newly born baby,
The baby wrapped in close bonds of cloth,
The baby laid in a manger, in a feeding trough for animals.
There you will find God for you:

You will find that God does not will your harm or destruction,
But your salvation.

It's in response to this proclamation
That God's name is praised by the powers of heaven.
This is what we read: And suddenly there was with the angel a
multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
**'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'**

That word , 'Glory,' has more of a function than a meaning.
What I mean is this:
Let's say we see something beautiful, and majestic, and transcendent:
Like a sunset or a mountain range or the stars in the outback.
We might say: 'this is glorious':
We are indicating with our words both our response
To the beauty, to the majesty, to the transcendence,
And acknowledging the outward reality of what we perceive.

Well, it is in the birth of Jesus,
In the tiny baby wrapped in clothes and laid in the manger,
That the glory of God is revealed,
And that God's peace is brought to earth,
Especially as people respond in trust to this great gift of God.

This is how the reading ends: **When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.**

The Shepherds, in other words, have confirmed with their senses
All the things that the angel had said.

But there is a note, even what could be called a strangely ominous note
As the narrative is about to conclude: **But Mary treasured all these
words and pondered them in her heart.**

In the Gospel Mary is the model disciple:
She hears the word of God and keeps it.

Mary is to learn that the Son that she has born,
Will be the one who goes to the cross to redeem people from their sin:
To save them from all the small g gods
Who seem to offer so much, but who in the end deliver so little.
The true God, now a tiny baby,
Will reveal what God is like
By doing what no small g god could do:
By taking away the sin of the world through his sacrificial death,
By conquering death and the grave through his resurrection,
And by reconciling to God the Father
All things through himself in his ascension to God's right hand.
This is what is to happen,
And this is what we as a church hold together
In our celebration of the Saviour's birth.

It's after this that the narrative finally concludes:

**The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had
heard and seen, as it had been told them.**

They return: to their unglamorous
But practical and helpful paths of life.
And we can follow them, as we,
Who perceive God's glory revealed in Christ,
Glorify God for what he has done also for us,
And as we serve our neighbour through acts of service
Even in the mundane reality of everyday life.
This is the way of faith in the true God.

I want end by drawing what you could call a theological conclusion
From the Christmas message.

If we were to ask God: what do you love?

What would you hate to lose?

What does God's revelation to us in Christ Jesus show us?

The little baby, wrapped, in cloths, lying in the manger,

Shows us that God loves us, and would hate to lose us:

As the bible says: **For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believe in him might not die, but have eternal life.**

Dear children, and all of you here,

God, the real God, does love us.

And it's the message of his love that frees us

From treating things as if they are God,

And that frees us to love each other.

May God keep us in true faith,

So that we may do acts of true love.

And the true God give you joy and peace in Christ Jesus! Amen!