8:00

The Christmas story is probably the greatest story ever told. It contains everything – conflict, anticipation, villains, heroes, unexpected visitors, journeying, fleeing, a birth, murder, intrigue, tenderness, fear and amazement - certainly a great story. And yet when we strip it back to the actual gospel account in Luke, we find it is a very simple story, filled with insignificant people, places and events. However, when the seemingly insignificant is filled with God’s presence, it is transformed and this should give us, an insignificant group of people meeting together in Baldock at 8:00am on a Sunday morning in December, hope for it reminds us that God sees things differently and with him everything is possible. He wants everyone of us to partner with him in his great plan of salvation.

The Old Testament reading today is from the book of Micah and it is here that we read the prophesy that a baby will be born in Bethlehem and that this baby, whose origin is from old, will be a great leader and will bring peace throughout the world. Because we look though modern eyes, we often forget that at the time, according to scholars and Micah, Bethlehem was a small, trade-route village six miles south of Jerusalem. But God used a seemingly unimportant place to make an impact – a place which he chose deliberately.

The name Bethlehem means house of bread and bread held great importance in biblical times. It was a staple in their diet, it was used in the temple to symbolise God’s provision and presence and played an important part in the Jewish Passover celebrations. Through the provision of Manna in the desert, God taught the Israelites to rely on him as He alone was their provider and sustainer. Later in his life, Jesus declares himself to be the Bread of Life, saying that whoever comes to him will never go hungry and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty, showing that coming to Jesus and believing in him are comparable to eating bread, because it sustains our spiritual life. Bread therefore symbolises salvation. Bethlehem, the house of bread, was chosen specifically by God to be the birthplace of the Bread of life, in order to give us life from now to eternity. This insignificant place found significance in the presence of God.

Our gospel reading, recalls a seemingly insignificant encounter – two cousins visiting each other, probably to share pregnancy stories and to support each other and yet as they greet each other this encounter becomes significant because Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and the baby leapt for joy in her womb. She recognised that God had blessed her insignificant cousin and as the New Testament for Everyone puts it, she ‘shouted at the top of her voice: ‘Of all women, you’re the blessed one! And the fruit of your womb – he’s blessed, too!’

She could have felt resentful that her younger cousin was pregnant at such a young age when she had waited many years to be pregnant, but none of this is there, instead she is filled with joy and excitement and without Mary telling her anything, recognises that God was at work and that Mary has been obedient to his calling. She, and Mary, like many other Jews living under the tyranny of Herod the Great, would probably have soaked themselves in the Jewish scriptures looking for signs of God’s rescue plan and through the working of the Holy Spirit Elizabeth instantly recognises that the unborn baby is the promised one, the Messiah, her Lord. This insignificant meeting became significant because of the presence of God.

Mary herself, was just an insignificant young girl, growing up in Nazareth, engaged to Joseph, and yet it was her God chose to be the mother of his son. When He stepped down into her life, her life changed forever. Her faithfulness to God and her willingness to accept the plan that God had for her, is recognised by Elizabeth when she says in v45

‘A blessing on you, for believing that what the Lord said to you would come true!’

In her song of praise, Mary recognises her own insignificance when she says, that God has ‘looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant’ and yet she recognises how by saying YES to God he has changed this insignificance into something very significant as she continues ‘Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

Personally, I think this verse is one of the most encouraging verses in the gospels as it gives me, an insignificant, 50 something year old teacher, hope and shows me how God can use even me to further his Kingdom on earth. God sees me differently, and although I might think that I am not the type of person that God notices or wants to partner with in his great plan, it is people just like you and me that he chooses, why? Because he loves us and has chosen us.

This year, this part of Luke’s story has taken on a special significance of me as earlier in the summer I was contacted by my cousin Mark. When we were children, he and his sister, Sarah, would come and stay with us for a few days each school holiday. His reason for contacting me was that he was dying and in his words, ‘he wanted help to fix his soul and find peace’. He said that somewhere buried deep inside him was a feeling of comfort and safety that he felt built on the faith that was at the heart of the world my family inhabited. Over the next three months we talked by text and email and then when his death was more imminent met in person. He said hearing Sarah and I babbling on about our childhood was comforting and brought back memories of our mothers. I had the privilege of spending the last few days of his life sat as his bedside in the hospice, praying for him and sharing God’s great love for him with him. The Holy Spirit was at work many years later, turning my parents many prayers and our insignificant childhood memories, into significant and transformational ones in order to further God’s kingdom.

So as we prepare once again for the coming of Jesus, let us not forget that God uses insignificant places, people and events, to change the world and to bring about his plan for salvation.

And as we come to share in bread and wine this morning, however insignificant and unimportant we feel, will we accept God’s invitation to allow the word of God, the Bread of Life, the Baby in the manger, to be born again in our own lives, recognising that this could lead to remarkable things because we never fully know whose life could be changed when we say YES to God.

In the words of Ian Adams,

As Mary was blessed,

So too in the tender mercy of God

Are we blessed.

So how will we live today as one blessed?

Let the Christ be carried within us today.

Sense the flutter of life,

The kick inside

Carry the Christ with love and care.

Be as a mother.

Attentive. Focused. Present

Do not rush.

For we are a home to the holy.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

**All-Age Communion**

We are about to watch a great story which rivals anything that Hollywood has ever come up with. It contains everything – conflict, anticipation, villains, heroes, intrigue, tenderness, fear and amazement - certainly a great story. However, as you watch and listen again to the story than many of you will have many, many times, I want you to look out for all the things that surprise you in it, all the insignificant, everyday people, places and events that appear in the story. And at the end of the performance, we will think about these in a little more detail.

So, sit back and watch carefully – oh and don’t forget to join in with the singing when you are asked to and keep your clapping to the end!

So, what did you notice:

**Mary** – a young girl, not much older than Katherine who was chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus. She probably wasn’t known by many people outside her family and yet by saying YES to God, she is still known over 2000 years later.

**Joseph –** a common carpenter, someone who worked with his hands, who was engaged to a young woman who became pregnant. He could have just left her but he didn’t he listened to the angel and stayed with her, becoming an earthly father to Jesus and because of that he has a very significant part to play in the story, especially as he came from Bethlehem. God chose him specifically.

**Shepherds** – in the time of Jesus, shepherds were misfits and outcasts, and there were loads of them! They were so insignificant that they weren’t even allowed to come into the cities and were often considered to be thieves – in some ways they were treated like refugees and homeless people are in our society today. And yet, it was to them that the Angels appeared and they didn’t hesitate to say YES we will go and see this baby and now over 2000 years later their story is told every single year.

**The inn-keeper** – He is so insignificant that Luke doesn’t even give him a name! And yet, when everyone else was saying NO, he said YES and found Mary and Joseph somewhere to stay and became very significant in the story.

**The stable** – this was a very insignificant place. It wasn’t a 5\* hotel where everyone was trying to stay – there wasn’t even a bed, just a manger, a trough where normally the animals fed. Do you know in the gospel of Luke the manger is mentioned 3 times – something really insignificant became significant and memorable when it was used by Jesus.

**Bethlehem**  - is the focus of the story – not Rome or Syria. We now think it is a very significant place, but at the time when Jesus was born it wasn’t. It was probably only the Jews who knew that it was the City of David and everyone else wouldn’t have cared because it was such a little place. It’s a bit like when people ask you where you come from and you say Baldock and they look at you blankly, or only know it because of the A1 services! But when Jesus was born there Bethlehem became a very important and significant place where people go today to see where Jesus was born.

**The birth of a baby** – that is actually quite an insignificant event as babies are born every day, in fact the UN estimates that 385,000 babies are born each day, that is about 140 million babies a year! Sometimes a birth makes the newspaper but then it usually only says the parents name, the weight of the baby and the fact that the mother and baby are doing well! The fact that there was a census and everyone was having to pay increased taxes would have been much more significant and hit the headlines. This insignificant birth was in fact the most significant birth ever. When this baby was born the sky lit up with angels and with a special star. Even creation joined in the celebrations.

This birth was anything but insignificant because it fulfilled all the prophecies in the Old Testament about a coming saviour. It was the moment when God broke into the world and changed the whole of history. In the Book of Corinthians Paul says that God chose things the world considers foolish (insignificant), powerless and despised by the world in order to shame the wise and the powerful and bring about something so important that when you believe the story and know that Jesus came to earth as a baby because God loves you, it changes your life forever.

So what about us, a group of people gathered together in a church in Baldock on a Sunday morning in December to watch some children perform a play. We probably appear quite insignificant and I am sure lots of us have felt insignificant at times. We think no one notices us, that we will never do anything that makes a real difference, we are just a nobody. But do you know it is for people like us that God sent Jesus that very first Christmas and that he sends him again every time this story is told.

The writer of the gospel of Luke, in telling the greatest of stories ever told, shares how God used a series of insignificant places, people and events to change the world. We might appear insignificant and not important as far as the world is concerned but each and everyone of us is so important to God that this Christmas, he invites us to the manager so that we can find out how significant we are to him. He then invites us to come to the communion table where he will remind us how he is still here, has chosen us and is calling us, showing us how significant and special we are to him.

So why don’t you this Christmas, either for the first time or for the umpteenth time, as we worship at the manger and at the communion table, offer your insignificant self to God, listen to what he is calling you to do and with all the insignificant people in our story, make room for him in your heart and life, and say with Mary ‘YES, Here I am, use me’ because when you do, I can assure you, something will happen and your life, and Christmas, will never be the same again.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.