

Emperors and Angels

Isaiah 9.2–7; Luke 2.1–20

a sermon at the Midnight Eucharist, Christmas Eve 2006

by the Bishop of Durham, Dr N. T. Wright

Sing a song of Christmas, of emperors and angels;
Sing a song of Christmas, of darkness now past;
Sing a song of starlight, of shepherds and of mangers;
Sing a song of Jesus, of peace come at last.

And don't we just want it? You can't hear the song of the angels, or the prophecy of Isaiah, in today's dangerous and chaotic world without thinking, with a sigh, 'Yes! That's what we'd like as our Christmas present: all the multiple debts, all the hard and unrewarded labour, all the soldiers' boots and the bloodstained clothing – let's do away with the lot of them!' But, like the angels going away into heaven, the vision fades; and we go back to thinking of Christianity as a private religion, as a once-or-twice-a-year thing, all right for old ladies and young children but not much use when it comes to the real problems we face in the real world. And though I (and I hope you) have been thrilled by what the Archbishop of Canterbury was saying from Bethlehem last week, lighting a flickering candle of hope in that dark place, we hear the reassurances of our politicians and with a sinking heart we wonder if anything will ever change, as the bland lead the blind and all of them end up in the ditch. I'll tell you something: if it was *our* country that was reduced to chaos by someone else's inept and money-driven warmongering, we'd be getting to grips with the promises and prophecies of peace quite quickly. We wouldn't be content simply to read Isaiah 9 at Christmas and forget about it for the rest of the year. We'd want to know, How can we turn this into action? What have we got to say, at Christmas or any other time, to the rulers of this world?

Well, you may say, I didn't expect to be told about empires and money and wars when I came to church tonight. I expected to hear lovely things that would make me feel good inside. But that's the trouble with how we've treated Christmas these many years: we've screened out the emperors, and so we've missed the point of the angels. The Christmas story, like Isaiah's prophecy, isn't about an escape from the real world of politics and economics, of empires and taxes and bloodthirsty wars. It's about God addressing these problems at last, from within, coming into our world – *his* world! – and shouldering the burden of authority, coming to deal with the problems of evil, of chaos and violence and oppression in all their horrible forms. And only when we look hard at those promises and come to grips with what they really mean are we able to grasp the real comfort and joy that Christmas does truly provide. Otherwise we are purchasing a spurious private comfort at the inflated cost of allowing the rest of the world to continue in its misery.

You see this clearly in Luke's story of the birth of Jesus, which we heard a moment ago. Luke takes the trouble to tell us about the Roman emperor Augustus, and his desire

to take a census of more or less the whole known world. This isn't just background information, or local colour to spice up the story. Empires, censuses and taxes were hot topics in the Middle East in the first century. When we have a census, we just fill in a boring form and send it off. They're going to tax us anyway. Every time they had a census there were riots and people got killed: censuses then raised the sharp and dangerous questions of who runs the world, how it's run, who profits by it all, who gets crushed in the process, and, perhaps above all, *when is it all going to change? And what should we be doing about it?* Luke has placed his story of Jesus' birth and the angels' song within this everyday story of Imperial behaviour because he wants us to know that Jesus' birth is not an invitation to a private religion into which we can escape and feel cosy, but a summons to us, as it was to his first followers, to sign on under his authority, to celebrate the birth of the Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, and to work under that authority for the growth of his promised kingdom of endless peace, of justice and righteousness. And, my friends, we have made a singularly bad job of all this of late, and it's time to get back on track.

Ah but, you say, it's always been like this. The politicians have always got it wrong, the church has always been muddled, and it'll never be any different. Not so. This next year we shall celebrate the 200th anniversary of the ending of the slave trade, as a result of the faithful and patient work of William Wilberforce and his colleagues, who set themselves to live and work under the authority of the Prince of Peace and thereby to deal with the most obvious moral and social problem of the day. Wilberforce put his hand to this task in 1787, and for twenty years he banged on about it, bringing bill after bill to Parliament only to see them thrown out, until at last in 1807 he succeeded. But of course he didn't stop there; he went on with tireless zeal to campaign, usually in the teeth of the political correctnesses of his day, to urge the values of the kingdom of God and the reign of the Prince of Peace upon the country and Parliament, in season and out. For a further twenty-six years he worked to outlaw not just the slave *trade* but slavery itself, until in 1833, as he lay on his deathbed, Parliament passed the bill which got rid of the scandal once and for all. My friends, *it can be done*. There were massive vested interests ranged against Wilberforce, but by prayer and faith and sheer hard work he and his friends took the gospel forwards into the real world. It's always costly, always tiring, it always takes everything we've got; but this is what it looks like when the song of the angels is heard and obeyed, when the power of the emperors is challenged and confronted, and when the Prince of Peace is celebrated and proclaimed in the middle of it all.

Tragically, after Wilberforce's death there grew up the extraordinary idea, driven by the self-interested ideologies that are still firmly running the western world, that the gospel of Jesus Christ was not about emperors and angels, but about a private spirituality and the promise of an escape hatch out of this world altogether: 'fit us for heaven, to live with thee there', instead of 'his kingdom shall increase continually'. In that picture, the angels cease to be the authoritative messengers who come to announce that heaven is taking over the running of earth, and become instead what you see on a thousand gooey calendars: the ethereal background music for an escapist spirituality which leaves the empires of the world free to do their own thing. And with that Luke's story, and Isaiah's prophecy, have been emasculated. It's time Christmas got its bits and bobs back, its

emperors and angels and its promise of real justice and real peace. The zeal of the Lord of hosts, says Isaiah, will do this. Yes, and the way God's zeal goes to work is through the cheerful and prayerful zeal of God's people.

Here is the great and tragic irony of the present Middle Eastern situation. Millions of people in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East now firmly believe that what Britain and America have been doing there is some kind of Christian crusade. It isn't. It's what happens when Christianity retreats into being a private religion and allows the real world to be run by smiling but cynical pragmatists. Yes, I know, people will tell us to shut up, to concentrate on saving souls and not to worry about the issues of state. But that misses the whole point of Christmas. Christmas is about God acting in the real world. It's about people like Wilberforce – people who go out into the world and make a difference in the name of Jesus. It's about people like you. I am praying that God will call several of you here tonight not only to trust him for yourselves, to come to know him in and through his incarnate Son, but also to put your shoulder to the wheel, to work in prayer and faith, and social and political skill, to carry forward the work of the kingdom that was launched at the first Christmas. We need you; we need you both in the ordained ministry and in the active lay work of the church; and we need to stay focussed on the task.

That's why I'm glad that in a few moments we're going to sing that great hymn 'It came upon the midnight clear'. It catches the meaning of Luke 2 better than most of the much-loved but essentially escapist carols. All except, that is, for the last verse. Look at it and feel free to correct it in your copy! 'For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophet-bards foretold . . .' and then, leaving behind the Christian hope and opting for an ancient pagan superstition, it says 'when, with the ever-circling years, comes round the age of gold'. Well, if you think the ages go round in circles and every so often you get a Golden Age when everything is peaceful and happy, think again; if that were the case, why should we work for it? Why not just shrug your shoulders and wait? That's *Qué Será Será* theology – whatever will be, will be. That wasn't good enough for William Wilberforce; it wasn't good enough for God, and Christmas proves it. Something needs to be *done*. Try singing this instead:

For lo, the days are hastening on,
by prophets seen of old,
When, by the Spirit's mighty power
Arrives the time foretold:
When Peace shall over all the earth
Its promised splendours fling,
And the whole world give back the song
Which now the angels sing.

(I'm going to ask the Succentor if we can have those words printed next year, but feel free to sing them tonight anyway.) The point is that God will complete the victory gained by Jesus, and that the Spirit is *already* at work to anticipate that final day. And the way the Spirit does this is quite simple: through you and me.

So where can you start? We can't all be Wilberforces, we can't all run political campaigns, we can't all lead great reforms. No; but we can pray, we can watch, and we can listen. We can, in fact, inhabit Luke's story of Jesus' birth right where we are. We can pray in love and devotion before the Christ-child, trusting that his new kingdom of peace and justice will come to birth within us and through us. But then we can watch for the empires of the world, the Augustus Caesars of our day: we can keep our eyes open for where the powers that run the world are crushing the little people who live on our street, in our town, in our local hospitals or prisons. And we can listen for the song of the angels. It will come in surprising ways, as it always does. God doesn't call everybody in the same way. But if you are learning to love the Christ-child you will find your eyes gradually being opened to what the powers of the world are up to and your ears gradually becoming tuned to the particular song that God's angels are trying to sing to you, and, more dangerously perhaps, *through* you. You will discover, in fact, the thing we call vocation: which may be as simple as volunteering to work a couple of evenings in a soup kitchen, or helping run a Traidcraft stall, or writing letters to opinion-formers, or organising prayer vigils and chains, or running a website to raise awareness of key issues – the sorts of things, in fact, granted some different technology, that William Wilberforce and his friends got up to. Every great work begins with little steps; usually it continues with little steps too.

And remember the story of the shepherds and the manger. We are so used to hearing about it – indeed, most of us never use the word 'manger' in any other context – that we often forget the point. The shepherds were told something – or thought they were told something – quite ridiculous: that God's Messiah, God's only Son, had been born just up the road. Now how on earth are you supposed to believe that? And what on earth could you do about it? Ah, but they were given a sign: you don't normally find babies in feeding-troughs, but that's where this one is. And so they went, and they saw, and they believed, and they worshipped. What's the equivalent for us today? Well, when you worship the Christ-child for yourself, and learn to open your eyes to the empires and your ears to the angels, you may well wonder whether there's any point in even trying to do anything about it all. It all seems quite ridiculous. And then you may begin to notice places where there are, so to speak, babies in mangers: places where God seems to have been startlingly at work, in a hospice or a prison or a day-care centre or a play-group, in Bible Study groups, in gospel work going forwards among drug addicts and prostitutes, in campaigns about debt and unjust laws and fair trade, whatever it may be. And then: watch for the empires, listen for the angels, worship the Christ-child – and go for it. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and his kingdom shall be established with justice and righteousness from this time forth and for evermore.