

## **Christmas 1 New Year's Eve 2017: Luke 2:15-21**

### **Prayer**

You may well remember the popular television programme "Call My Bluff". Two teams of three celebrities would take it in turns to describe an obscure word, which the opposite team would have to identify. Of course only one was true: the other two were bluffs. Well, here's my Christmas word for "Call my Bluff", which we sang quite a few times in our first hymn. Nowell! (Spell)

A Nowell is a shout of joy exclaimed with song

Nowell simply means Good News

Nowell is derived from the French word for Christmas which is "Noel" (spell it out) and means "Birth"

Of course you may think none of these are right and you have a different understanding of Nowell. I wonder what your thoughts will be after listening to my sermon.

Luke's account of the birth, or Nowell, of Christ is the fullest and most descriptive of all the four gospels. The first two long chapters of Luke cover the birth of Jesus' relative, John the Baptist, the joyful meeting of the two

pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, the presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple as well as our Saviour's birth through the eyes of Mary and the joyful visit of the shepherds to the manger. Luke writes a gospel which is universal, meant for all, with the leading character Jesus, the Saviour of the world, a Messiah for everyone.

The appeal of Luke's account is that he begins with the poor and lowly, with a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, with a woman living in the town of Nazareth named Mary and with a group of shepherds, poor men on the night shift. His Messiah is born in a manger, an ox's feeding trough. The story concentrates on the marginalised, for such were women and shepherds at that time. Luke's account, although universal, is born from Israel's history, reflects the Jewish traditions and evokes the Hebrew Scriptures. Like Noah, Elizabeth and Zechariah are "righteous before God" and "childless" like Abraham and Sarah. There are angels and miraculous births. We hear in the last verse of this morning's gospel how Jesus was circumcised and named eight days after his birth in the Jewish tradition. This is remembered tomorrow, eight days after Christmas

There are four wonderfully joyous moments, or Nowell occasions, in Luke's nativity account, each one accompanied by song. When Mary greets Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. Mary then sings a song of praise to God, which is known as the Magnificat, "My soul magnifies the Lord". When John the Baptist was born to Elizabeth and Zechariah, who previously had had no children and were getting on in years, there was great joy at such a miracle. At John's circumcision and naming Zechariah spoke for the first time since the angel had announced to him of the coming birth. Zechariah named his son John and filled with the Holy Spirit sings a song of praise and prophecy to God, which we know as the Benedictus, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel". Then Simeon recognises the baby Jesus as the Messiah at our Lord's presentation. He takes him in his arms and in his joy praises God with the song now known as the Nunc Dimmitis, "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace". And the fourth moment of joy, or Nowell, is when the shepherds on the hillside witness a multitude of the heavenly host praising God in their joy with the song "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace."

Angels play a predominant part in Luke's account of the nativity appearing first to Zechariah, then to Mary and finally to the shepherds. They bring Nowell, or good news, of the impending births of John and Jesus, and finally Nowell to the shepherds, not only of the birth in the city of David of the Saviour, who is the Messiah, The Lord, but also of a sign of where the Shepherds will find him. Most important, this good news of great joy is for all people in all nations. Now you have to be careful when you receive good news or Nowell from angels, as they can complicate matters. Zechariah, who was reluctant to believe his wife Elizabeth would give birth, was struck dumb. Mary also questioned her chances of giving birth. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The reply, "Nothing will be impossible with God" was hardly helpful and she was certainly left in a bit of a dilemma with Joseph, her fiancé. The shepherds, however, had no hesitation, no questioning. When the angels had left them they hurried to the place where he was born and, in their joy, they made known what the angels had told them to Mary, to Joseph, to everyone they met. With the arrival of the shepherds and their good news perhaps Mary was

reassured that her baby, despite being born in the most difficult circumstances, was indeed someone very special, the Son of God, just as Gabriel had said. But her response was more measured than the shepherds as “she treasured these words and pondered them in her heart.” Pondered is an ambiguous word. Perhaps it suggests Mary was considering all these events very deeply and thoroughly, weighing things up carefully in her mind. Or perhaps pondering suggests puzzlement, uncertainty of what was happening to her.

And how do we receive the angels’ good news? Do we react like the shepherds, shout with joy and go out and tell everyone? Do we sing Nowell like Mary, Zechariah and the angels? Do we see Christmas as a magical time of infinite possibility and promise? Perhaps, like Mary, we think or ponder these things in our hearts, wondering what it is all about. Or do we say to ourselves “Peace on Earth? What about the London and Manchester bombings? How do we deal with a nation divided by Brexit? How can we continue to pray for peace with wars in Africa and the Middle East continually waging? And don’t let’s mention the unreliability of some world leaders.

Tonight, as we welcome in another New Year, as we hear the bells ringing out the old and ringing in the new, as we watch the spectacle of fireworks where will our hearts be? Looking back on times of war and uncertainty, of poverty and selfishness or looking forward with hope because we can sing Nowell. Emmanuel is here. God is with us. Tennyson's words are still so appropriate:

“Ring out old shapes of foul disease;  
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold  
Ring out the thousand wars of old  
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,  
The larger heart, the kindlier hand  
Ring out the darkness of this land  
Ring in the Christ that is to be”

Bill Pattinson (30.12.2017)

