

Angelic visitations in Luke 2 and 22. Bethesda meditation. 10 December 2006.

Reading : Isaiah 7. 3, 10-14; 36. 2, 36; Luke 2. 8-14; 22. 41-42.

This morning I want to consider our Lord Jesus in connection with the two angelic visitations about which we have read. There are, of course, several other angelic appearances recorded in Luke's gospel but they occur either before our Lord's birth, Luke 1. 11, 26, or after His death and resurrection, Luke 24. 4. We have read of the only two angelic visits during our Lord's life here on earth which Luke reports – both of which took place at night.

First, we read that 'an angel of the Lord' paid a visit to a field in the region of Bethlehem to announce the birth of the Saviour, who then *lay in a manger*, Luke 2. 8-12. Then we read that 'an angel' paid a visit to the Garden of Gethsemane to strengthen our Lord during His conflict as He fell and *lay on the ground*, Mark 14. 35.

As we read, the first occasion was a time of 'great joy', Luke 2. 9. Indeed, the angel's announcement brings to a climax the theme of rejoicing which has been running through the opening section of this gospel. In chapter 1, we read, respectively, of the joy of Zacharias, of Elizabeth, of her son John and of Mary.¹ But now the angel declares to the shepherds mounting guard over their sheep, 'Behold, I bring you good news of *great joy*', 2. 10.

God once asked Job, 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... Who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?', Job 38. 4-7. And this angel in Bethlehem's field would have been among those angelic 'sons of God'. But, when he shouted for joy at the world's creation, little did he think that the day would come when 'the Lord, the King of glory' – when the very One who had *laid* the foundations of the earth – would Himself come down *to* the earth He had founded to *lie* in a manger – in some mucky feeding trough!

But if the angelic visitation of Luke 2 marked an occasion of *the greatest joy*, the angelic visitation of Luke 22 marked an occasion of *the greatest sorrow* – of a grief which beggars description. For we read that, at that time, Jesus 'began to be *sorrowful* and deeply distressed. Then He said to them (His disciples), My soul is exceedingly *sorrowful*', Matt. 26. 37-38.

Initially in Luke 2 there was only one angel, v. 9, but, as soon as that angel had delivered his momentous message, he was suddenly joined by 'a multitude of the heavenly army' – *not* come to do battle with anyone, but to sing an anthem of praise to God. For the same wondrous birth which had earlier drawn Mary and Joseph from Nazareth, v. 4, and would soon draw shepherds from their flocks, vv. 15-16, now drew a large troop of angels from the invisible world.² And I have no problem with this angelic military choir coming there to ascribe *glory to God in heaven above* and to invoke *peace* (well-being, blessedness, that is) *on men on earth below*.

But surely this 'multitude of the heavenly army' were needed, if anything, not so much in Luke 2, but in Luke 22 – not in the field of Bethlehem, but in the Garden of Gethsemane. And, yes, they *could* have come – yes, they *would* have come – *if* He – the Lord Jesus – had only asked. Remember His words to well-meaning Peter in that Garden, 'Do you think that I cannot ask (that I cannot appeal to³) My Father⁴, and He will provide Me now with more than twelve legions of angels?', Matt. 26. 53.⁵ A single Roman legion comprised 6,000 men.⁶ So 'more than 12 legions of angels' – over 72,000 angels – would certainly have formed a respectable 'multitude of the heavenly army'! But, no, the Lord Jesus would not ask the Father to assign them to Him.

As we read, the virgin birth spoken of by Luke in chapters 1 and 2⁷ had been foretold long before – well over 700 years before indeed – in Isaiah 7; 'the Lord will himself give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son', v. 14. And Isaiah is careful to tell us that this word of the Lord had been given to King Ahaz 'at the end of the conduit (the channel, the canal or aqueduct) of the upper pool, on the highway of the fuller's field', Isa. 7. 3.⁸ This precise location features in only one other incident recorded in the Old Testament – and I read of it from Isaiah 36; 'the Rab-shakeh (the Commander-in-Chief of the Assyrian army) ... stood by the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway of the fuller's field', v. 2 – from where he sought to intimidate the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the days of Ahaz's son, Hezekiah – to brow-beat them into submission and surrender to Sennacherib, the King of Assyria.⁹ But the Assyrian invasion and siege came to an abrupt end when, in the words of 2 Chronicles 32, 'the Lord sent an angel', v. 21 – yes, just one – who, we read, 'smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and eighty-five thousand', Isa. 37. 36.¹⁰ Psalm 103. 20 says that angels 'excel in strength'¹¹ – if you have any doubt, ask Sennacherib!

And if just *one* angel could do that, what then could *over 72,000* do?¹² I think it is safe to say that such a 'multitude of the heavenly army' would have encountered no difficulty in dispatching the 'great *multitude*, armed with swords and staves (or cudgels)' who accompanied Judas into Gethsemane to arrest Jesus that dark night, Matt. 26. 47.

But no – as the angel in Luke 2 said – our Lord had come as 'Saviour'. And if He was to be that He needed to go from Gethsemane to Golgotha. There could be no large-scale angelic invasion!

Concerning the birth of Jesus, told in Luke 2, the writer to the Hebrews records that 'entering into the world, He (the Lord Jesus) says ... behold, I have come ... to do *your will*, O God', Heb. 10. 5-7. And in the Garden of Gethsemane, detailed in Luke 22, when this resolve was tested to the extreme, He responded with the well-known words, 'not my will but *your will* be done', v. 42 – 'By the which will', the writer to the Hebrews says, ' we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all', Heb. 10. 10. And so this morning, as we take the bread and drink from the cup, we remember and celebrate both our Lord's wonderful submission and devotion to God and His matchless grace to us.

One angel *followed by many* in Luke 2; *just one* angel in Luke 22. He would not ask!

Footnotes

¹ Respectively, 'you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth', 1. 14; 'when her neighbours and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her', 1. 58; 'as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy', 1. 44; and 'my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour', 1. 47.

² Not, I note, to the holy Babe but to the humble shepherds – not to the manger but to the meadow.

³ The word is used in military contexts of summoning someone to your aid as an ally.

⁴ Ask Him just once is the tense.

⁵ A whole legion for Him and one each for the 11 apostles – and still 'more'!

⁶ 10 cohorts of 600 men apiece. Flavius Josephus informs us that there was one cohort of infantry and one cavalry contingent available in Jerusalem during the feast of Passover. A cohort of provincial troops numbered anything between 400 and 600. Pilate had a total of five infantry cohorts and one cavalry to cover the whole of Palestine. And there were 10 cohorts in one legion.

⁷ Luke 1. 26-27, 34-35; 2. 7.

⁸ An adequate water supply is essential for a city under siege. The king was probably inspecting it.

⁹ Both messages faced kings of Judah with the same spiritual issue and decision – would they, in the face of intimidation from other nations, would put their trust in God or not.

¹⁰ Hezekiah, together with Isaiah, 'prayed and cried', 2 Chron. 32. 20. Compare what the writer to the Hebrews says of our Lord Jesus, 'who in the days of his flesh ... offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears', Heb. 5. 7.

¹¹ Peter spoke of 'angels, greater in might and power', 2 Pet. 2. 11.

¹² If each killed 185,000, they could kill 13.32 billion. That is, they could depopulate the world today several times over.