

“SHOCK AND AWE”
Matthew 2/Luke 1 & 2

I’m no great student of military history, but odd words and phrases from the world of wars and battles seep into my consciousness as they do into everyone else’s. I’m sure there are some of you here today who will know what I’m on about if I talk about sieges and the ways in which their use was perfected over the centuries. You may have heard of the Roman “tortoise” (or “testudo”) which enabled large groups of soldiers to link shields and advance a bit like a tank on legs. There was the saturation theory of archery at Agincourt, where the English overwhelmed the French with their fire power. In the nineteenth century, particularly during the Napoleonic Wars, there was the policy of “scorched earth”, whereby a retreating army totally destroyed everything that could possibly be of use to the enemy. The Luftwaffe developed the strategy of “blitzkrieg” during the Second World War as a way of trying to get the initiative in battle. And the most recent phrase to gain any kind of common currency is from this last year, from the Gulf War, in which the Coalition’s main tactic was apparently “shock and awe” – the deployment of overwhelming firepower which left the enemy open-mouthed with amazement at the power and precision of Coalition weaponry (at least, that was the intention).

It struck me that “shock and awe” would be a good way to sum up Christmas. I’m not talking about the effect the arrival of Auntie Florrie has on the assembled family, nor the reaction to Cousin George when he’s had a couple of drinks too many: I’m thinking of the very first Christmas. We’ve heard the story read to us once again this evening and in each of the extracts there is an element of what we might call “shock and awe”. When Gabriel appeared to Mary, she was “*greatly troubled*” (*Luke 1:29*). The shepherds out in the fields around Bethlehem were “*terrified*” (*Luke 2:9*), and as they returned to their sheep from the stable, telling their story to anyone who would listen, we read that “*all who heard were amazed*”. It’s the same in the account Matthew gives of the visit of the wise men from the East. When King Herod hears of the mission of the Wise Men, he was “*greatly disturbed and all Jerusalem with him*” (*Matthew 2:3*). And the wise men themselves ended up on their knees in the stable because they were drawn to worship the baby (*Matthew 2:11*). In John’s rather less down to earth account of the coming of Jesus, we read that we have “*seen his glory*” (*John 1:14*).

The coming of Jesus, the long-awaited messiah, the Son of God into our world as a bawling, bloodied baby amongst the dung and dust of the Bethlehem stable was an occasion of shock and awe. There was **shock** because things didn’t happen as you would have expected them to. All the expectations of the people were subverted, expectations of the Messiah who had been promised for so long, whom the Hebrew prophets had been foretelling for centuries. The Messiah did not enter this world on a fiery chariot, with hosts of angel armies. There was no great demonstration of power and strength. The

Messiah, God's Son – Emmanuel, God with us – came as a baby, a weak, vulnerable, highly dependent baby. He was born not in a palace, not to a royal wife, not with the attentions of the best midwives and with fanfares of trumpets, but in the muck and mess of a pub outhouse, in relative poverty and great humility. God was coming into his world in person – but the shock was not that he came (after all, as we've said he'd been promising to do that for centuries), but in the way that he came.

And there was **awe**, because despite the unexpected way in which he came, it was still very clearly of God, this was still a divine occasion. The royal trumpeters didn't herald the birth, but the sky was filled with angels and a strange star shone over the town. The baby was born of a young woman who was apparently a virgin. There was a clear sense of glory over all that happened. And both shepherds and wise men found themselves on their knees before this tiny baby. They worshipped and then spread the good news with excitement and enthusiasm.

For us – as we have said so many times that the saying of it is itself so familiar – this story no longer fills us with shock and awe. We have seen the pictures of it on a million Christmas cards, in a thousand children's story books, in scores of pastiches and parodies. We have heard it read so many times at Christmas, sung so many songs about it, celebrated it in so many ways and with so much excess and extravagance. It is a story we have tamed and domesticated so that it has no force any longer – and I doubt very much whether anything I say or anything anyone else can say will restore its freshness in our minds.

But if we take a few moments to pause over this Christmas time – away from work and the routine demands of everyday life – we might ponder on our own state before God. Reflect on the ideals that Jesus came to embody, to teach and to die for – peace, honesty, integrity, love, compassion, holiness. And then consider how far humanity – and that particular expression of humanity that lives inside your own skin – falls short of those ideals. Those ideals are the characteristics which God originally created in human beings – reflections of his own self, the "*image of God*". If you reflect carefully and honestly on that great disjunction between God's intention and your expression of it, between Jesus' perfection and your sinfulness, then I reckon you might indeed get quite a shock. So accustomed have we become to our own faults and weaknesses, our own wrong choices and their inevitable consequences, that we fail to address them as we should. We are as comfortable with the faults in our own lives as we are with the soft-focus, chocolate box images of Christmas.

And then go on to reflect on what God has done about that great divide between his ideals and our reality. God so loved this world – with all its mess and muck, with all its sin and cynicism, with all its pain and poverty – that he sent his only Son, Jesus, the baby of Bethlehem, into this world order to do something

about it, to ensure that no-one need die with their relationship to him unresolved, with the prospect of a lost and wasted eternity. God loves you so much that Jesus was born into that smelly stable, Jesus grew to adulthood criticised and persecuted, Jesus was executed and humiliated on the cross at Golgotha, Jesus was brought through death and out the other side to blaze a trail for all who believe in him – God loves **you** so much that he was prepared to let Jesus go through all that in order for you to be restored to what you were meant to be. That is awesome. You really think hard about that and it should drive you to your knees in wonder and gratitude and worship.

Maybe you've never thought about Christmas like that before. Maybe you've never really linked the sentimental, cosy pictures of the baby in the manger with the awesome, shocking Son of God who left the glory of heaven to burst from the bloodied thighs of young Mary into a feeding trough. If you want to find out a bit more about this Jesus, you could join an Alpha Group and explore the story in more depth. If you want to do something about it tonight, then have a word with me afterwards over coffee and mince pies. But whoever you are, however deep you're in with Jesus, pray that Christmas will never lose its shock and awe for you.