

CONGREGATIONAL NATIVITY DRAWN FROM LUKE'S GOSPEL

PLAY

Scene One

In Rome, 30 years after Jesus was crucified – a Roman house

Luke with his notepad and Paul with his chains (tagged) and a soldier or soldiers in the background and people, in Roman and Jewish and other kinds of dress mill about or listen in

Paul: So you are going to write the story of the whole thing, Luke? Starting from the beginning, in Jerusalem, and coming right to today, with me a prisoner for Jesus, here in Rome?

Luke: Yes, Paul. I've been collecting stories. There are a lot of people who want to understand Jesus better. I think I can help them, especially because I can see now that Jesus did not just make a splash in his lifetime, only for everything to go back to normal afterwards. We can see he started something big that is still developing.

Paul: Yes, it is amazing what has happened. I was turned around by Jesus: He stopped my campaign against the Christians and gave me the task of carrying Jesus, in word and deed, in my body, to the Gentiles all through the Empire. That is what he said was to be done, and here we are now – in Rome.

Luke: But you are a prisoner

Paul: Don't worry about that: it means I've got to Rome and it's not so bad being a prisoner like this. My guards are friendly: (*gesturing towards the soldier*) we get on well together don't we, Cassius?

Cassius: We do, Paul; you are not much trouble and I respect you as a prisoner for Christ.

Paul: That's great, isn't it? And what's more, I live in my own rented house. It's open to anyone and so Jews and Gentiles of all kinds come and see me, and I talk, I talk and talk, about Jesus and the kingdom of God. So the good news spreads, I play it off the Jews so that they can see that what happened with Jesus is like the light shining out from Jerusalem to Gentiles everywhere, and I reflect it back to the Jews: I say to them, Look, do you not see all these Gentiles coming to believe in Jesus? That is to the credit of Israel – it is the glory that God has brought

to Israel? These Gentiles show that, with Jesus who was a Jew, God has made a break-out into all the world. God has given Jews and Gentiles someone they can enjoy and love and serve together.

But I don't need to tell you, Luke. You know the argument – I set it out in my letter to the Romans, years before I actually came here. And you have seen it in action when you came on mission with me.

Luke: Yes, Paul, those were great days, the adventures we had together. And the way you argue for Jesus reminds me of a story I've already collected about an old man called Simeon. Do you know it?

Paul: No I don't think I've heard this one. Tell me – you have such a nice way of telling stories, Luke.

Luke: Imagine, in your mind's eye, *-he points -* an old man in the Temple in Jerusalem, many years ago, and an old woman, Anna.

We see them come on to the other side of the stage –

Simeon: Well, Anna, how are you today?

Anna: the bones creak, Simeon, the voice croaks, the eyes water, but I am holding on till God redeems Jerusalem; so the heart goes on smiling in hope.

Simeon: Yes, that's right, sister: hold on. God is faithful. He even told me I would not die till I have seen the Lord's Anointed One coming. So I don't give myself any excuse for staying in bed any morning: I struggle up, and think, Today, Today may be the day: Lord, come, I say, I shall be glad.

Anna: Look, here's a handsome family coming.

Mary and Joseph with the baby approach from the other side of the stage

Simeon: I have a strange feeling, Anna. Could this be the One?

He goes to Mary, and takes the baby. He is moved, looking at the baby, looking up to heaven –

Lord your promise is coming true for me, so now you can let me go, and I can let go, in peace and joy -

Joseph: What are you talking about, sir? what promise?

Simeon: I am seeing today with my own eyes the salvation God promised to bring to us – a light to lighten the Gentiles, all those outside the Law of God, who worship idols and don't know him – a light coming *in this baby* . The glory of Israel is what God gives to the world through Israel, through this baby, a real Jew being brought to the Temple to be dedicated to God. You watch out, young man, in time you will see it happen in his life – I see it already with my prophetic eye.

looking at the baby: I bless you, the Baby and his Mother: Take note, watch, this child is set for the fall and rising of many people in Israel. Things are going to happen because of him – the history of God is on its way here. He will be a sign and there will be contradiction – *to Mary* - and a sword will pierce through your own soul - It will all be brought out into the open, into God's light, when people meet this baby and face up to the challenge he brings. In bright daylight, what people really think will be brought out into the open. When they meet this baby and when they choose to go with him or to do away with him, what they really are and what they are living for will become clear.

Anna: Thank you, God, Jerusalem will be redeemed, the people will be free, God will be honoured, it is coming

Joseph: This gets odder and odder – being a father is difficult enough but all this talk dizzies me. After all, I'm not a theologian

Mary: Don't worry, Joseph, just keep quiet and think about it. We will see what God makes of it all in time.

They go off together, it is like a vision fading

Paul and Luke come back into the centre from the side where they have been watching

–

Paul That's just what I argue with the Jews – this Jesus is the Saviour and Lord, he comes *from* the Jews, *for* the Jews *but not just* for the Jews, for all the world – the story of Jesus started with Jews in the Jewish tradition, and has gone out into all the world and been welcomed by the Gentiles. So light shines out from Jerusalem, and glory reflects back to Israel from the Gentiles, thanks to Jesus. And this is God's saving presence on earth, working itself out in this history.

Luke It's a good story, this one of Simeon. He summarises the pattern that runs through the whole story of Jesus up to the present: There are insiders and outsiders, stay at home brothers and wild wandering brothers, Jews and Gentiles, and they can go on being insiders and outsiders, distant from each other, enemies even, or they can find themselves playing different happy interlocking parts in God's story. I am going to craft my whole history on this pattern.

Paul It will be a work of art, Luke – and it will spread the good news of Jesus. I know the pattern, I've seen it in all my mission, I've lived it, I'm a Jew rooted in my tradition, but I was turned around and opened up, and sent to the Gentiles to be like a light for them – that is how my being a Jew comes to its highest glory. But how did the story of Jesus begin on earth, in history? I don't know much about that. Do you have more stories about the beginning, Luke?

Luke Yes I do – and after a song I can tell you, - Just sit down here and keep your eyes and ears open

CarolMidnight

Scene Two

Scene changes: we go back in time to Jerusalem BC

The stage is set as the Temple – a simple set is required – there must be room for a crowd of people to stand outside praying – say, along the back of the stage, so that the action in the temple takes place in front of them

At one side there is the house of Zechariah the priest, where he is sitting at breakfast with his wife Elizabeth.

Zechariah Elizabeth, my dear, it's no good pretending: We are old. It is not nice being old. I am tired. Cracking up. Weary of waiting – I serve God in the temple, but what good does that do in this rotten world? We live under the shadow of Herod, who has little respect for God. And behind him are the sacrilegious unbelieving Romans with their new Emperor Augustus, who thinks he has the world in his hand.

Elizabeth But Zechariah, you shouldn't talk like that. You are a good man, strictly following the commands of God, Herod or no Herod.¹

Zechariah True, but what comes of our faith and our worship? Where is God? The people come to pray, they are full of devotion, they bring their devotion to the Temple, and they take it away, day after day, they come and they go - but nothing changes. It makes you wonder about God, doesn't it? What does God *do* to save his people?

Elizabeth: Really, Zechariah, I don't want to hear you saying such things. You can be as rude as you like about Herod, but God...²

Zechariah I'm sorry, I don't mean to be irreverent or unbelieving. But still, I can understand when the people say, What's the good of praying? After all, we are in the same boat, aren't we? You and me, I mean. We go on, being good, being faithful, right into this old age, but look at us, we have no children out of it. We will soon be dead and gone, and it will be as though we had never been – there will be no one to remember us.

Elizabeth Don't remind me, Zechariah – I miss the children I never had. But it can't be helped now – it is too late, though it is still makes me ashamed, all these prolific breeders bringing their children to Mums and Toddlers, they look down on me. When I walk down the street, all these young mothers proudly shepherding their broods, I feel them all despising me or pitying. But all the same, I hold my head up,

¹ This little piece is adapted from the wonderful story of depressed Martin Luther and his clever wife Katherina von Bora: Martin Luther was a very cheerful man, as a rule; but he had terrible fits of depression. He was at one time so depressed that his friends recommended him to go away for a change of air, to see if he could get relief. He went away; but he came home as miserable as ever; and when he went into the sitting-room, his wise wife Kate, Catherine von Bora, was sitting there, dressed in black, and her children round about her, all in black. "Oh, oh!" said Luther, "who is dead?" "Why," said she, "doctor, have not you heard that God is dead? My husband, Martin Luther, would never be in such a state of mind if he had a living God to trust to." Then he burst into a hearty laugh, and said, "Kate, thou art a wise woman. I have been acting as if God were dead, and I will do so no more. Go and take off thy black."

If God be alive, why are we discouraged? If we have a God to look to, why are we cast down? Let us rejoice and be glad together; for God will do all that he has promised, for this reason!

Spurgeon's Expositions

<https://johnomalley.me/reflections/2014/4/16/kate-luther-wife-of-martin-luther-announced-god-is-dead-read-wh>
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² Ezekiel 34

my husband is a priest, and when all is said, we have got one another. It's no good being down and complaining – just do our duty as we have always done.....

look at the time, you must get to the temple. It is a great thing to be a priest – just remember that, all the glory of Aaron is on you when you serve God in the temple.

She pecks him on the cheek and pats him on the back, or is it more like giving him a little shove to get him out of the house?

Zechariah, (walks to the holy place, through All the people around praying, arms raised etc) Good morning, Keep praying

He goes into the hidden place, and starts to make the incense offering ... (how are we to engineer a hidden place which is visible and audible?)

the Angel Gabriel appears and stands still with quiet authority while Zechariah is busy incensing - until suddenly Z sees him and falls back, drops the censer and trembles (can we get a censer and have it lit – and is it safe to drop it?)

Gabriel: Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.

Zechariah What ... what prayer?

Gabriel Why, what you've just been talking about with your wife Elizabeth . You haven't got a son. You want a son. She stills suffers from never having had a child.

Zechariah Yes that's too bad, but we gave up praying about it long ago. It didn't seem to work, you see. Elizabeth grieves – well, to be frank, she grumbles, but she's tough and she doesn't let it stop her getting on with life.

Gabriel Yes she grumbles. The trouble with you people, you holy temple people too, is that you give up praying in any decent cheerful way, and you grumble. And then you are so stupid, you don't remember God hears your grumbles and he takes them to be the best prayers you are able to make – he does understand it's a hard life.

But now, I've got good news for you. It's time to cheer up. Can you remember how to do that? You are a bit out of practice. Cheer up, because your wife is going to have a son, and you will call him John. (*emphatically*) Call him John. You will have joy and gladness and many people will celebrate his birth, wildly.

Zechariah But I am very old, and getting tired. It takes twenty years before a son is reared and off your hands. I'm glad this is only a dream – if it really happened I couldn't face it. Fatherhood at my age wouldn't be fair

Gabriel This is real, Zechariah, and you'd better buck up. Step up to the plate – and make the best of it. It's a very good deal you're getting. This boy John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from before he is born. When he grows up he will make a massive difference to many people in Israel, for he will turn them to the Lord their God. He will go before God preparing his way on earth, and do it with the spirit and power of Elijah, the great prophet of old. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. So the people will be ready for the Lord.

(strongly) Zechariah, you really have got to be ready for the job: John has got to be properly looked after. You must see he never drinks wine or strong liquor – the Spirit will be enough for him.

Zechariah: Look, this is all very persuasive, you are quite like the pushy salesmen I drive away from the door every day – but I'm not a gullible pushover, you know: You can't expect me to take this seriously. I am an old man and my wife, well, she can't remember the menopause, it was so long ago.

Gabriel: I am not a dream. I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. This is God speaking, God promising, God saying to you: 'Zechariah, I am giving you this job to do for me.' But now, because you did not believe my words, which will come true in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.

Z tries to protest, but can only splutter; Gabriel sedately withdraws

Z walks out through the waiting crowd of people praying. He has to gesture to try to explain.

Pray-er One: What's the matter, Zechariah?

Pray-er Two: Have you had a vision? did it give you a big scare?

He can only wave his arms and roll his eyes or whatever - and goes home to Elizabeth.

Scene three

Five months later – we need time signs – Elizabeth beginning to look as though she is having a baby, and being John he is already kicking hard. She puts her hand over him to calm him down,

‘This is what the Lord has done for me: he has looked favourably on me and is taking away the disgrace I have endured among my people.’

Scene Four

in the middle of the church, not on the stage --

Mary has a bucket – there is a woman’s harsh shout from inside the house –

Mary, have you got that water yet – just get on with you...

Mary moves sluggishly, the bucket is heavy ...

Gabriel appears again on the stage ... out of Mary’s sight

Gabriel speaking to the congregation: This is a busy time for me but it’s good that things are on the move at last. We’ve all been waiting a long time, wondering what will happen, what will it be like when God does something special

I’m a bit surprised it’s being done like this – having dealt with Zechariah the priest I thought my next job would be to go to the king or maybe the Emperor and put them in their place, get them to do their job properly. But nothing of the sort: Go to Mary, - that’s my instructions, - but she’s hardly more than a girl and not outstanding, quite mediocre you could say, even though she is engaged to Joseph who is a descendant of David. She’ll be shocked – I shall enjoy seeing her face, but I don’t want her getting awkward like that old man Zech –

So he walks towards where Mary is -

Gabriel Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.’

Mary is silent, but evidently perplexed, looking warily, wondering what he is after. She is not used to being talked to like this....as we know – there is another urgent scream from inside the house ...Mary, I need that water, NOW

Gabriel Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And what favour! You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will not be a run of the mill baby. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Mary How can I have a son? I haven't got a husband - yet

Gabriel That is a bit of a problem, I admit. But you will see: The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

And if that is not good enough for you, let me tell you this: your cousin Elizabeth who you know is very old and way past it, has conceived a son. She is six months pregnant now – and everyone thought she was barren and finished.. With God nothing is impossible

Mary (this is a key speech – make it tell) Why should this happen to me? Why can't I go on living in my ordinary decent way, in my little house in this little street? Have I got to let this happen? *pause* I must think this through. *pause* When I get down to basics, what am I? Who am I? *pause* I am the handmaid of the Lord, that's what I am. What else can I be? So, let it be to me as you have said. I believe, I obey

Gabriel goes off

Sing The angel Gabriel from heaven came (BPW 177)

Mary leaves her bucket, picks up a bag and goes walkabout with hurry, round the church and then back up to the stage – that is, into the hill country, 'a city in Judah' (could it be other than Jerusalem?) and to the house of Zechariah – (how are all these places to be signed?)

Mary: Hello, cousin Elizabeth: I am glad to see you

Elizabeth is, waiting there, in a fluster, the baby leaping in the womb, She is filled with Holy Spirit and exclaims in a loud excited voice:

‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

Mary responds, supported by a choir of women and girls speaking the text (in one version or another) :

Mary’s Song: the Magnificat

My heart is overflowing with praise of my Lord,
my soul is full of joy in God my Saviour.
For he has come and noticed me, his humble servant
and, after this, all the people who ever shall be
will call me the happiest of women!

The one who can do all things has done great things for me—
oh, holy is his Name!
Truly, his mercy rests on those who fear him in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has swept away the high and mighty.
He has thrown kings down from their thrones and lifted up the humble.
He has satisfied the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away with empty hands.

Yes, he has helped Israel, his child:
he has remembered the mercy that he promised to our forefathers, to Abraham and his
sons for evermore!

from J B Phillips translation, with small changes

SCENE five *There is a lot of room for improvisation and development here. Note that the scene moves from near burlesque to serious celebration – it is essential that the whole thing is not reduced to caricature*

Neighbours and kinsfolk – scattered in different parts of the church – shout across to one another –

Joanna Hey, Nathaniel, have you heard the news?

Nathaniel No, Joanna, it's all quiet here. What's up?

Joanna About Elizabeth!

Simon: You mean old Aunty Elizabeth? Is she still alive?

Joanna: of course she is, callow brute. She's had a baby

Simon: You're pulling my leg

Ruth: How wonderful – how thrilling! Boy or girl?

Joanna: A boy

Nathaniel: So we'll have another Zechariah in the family – see how tough the tradition is, we don't die out easily

Ruth: Well I'm going to see the baby; I want to celebrate – we must all go

Leah: Do we have to go? All these old people in the family, they're so boring

Joanna: Yes of course we do: you mustn't be rude. And remember, you will be old one day.

Simon: I'm going - anything for a laugh, I say – see you there...

They all make their way towards the house, on the stage, hitherto in darkness.

Elizabeth is there – there is a flutter of congratulations and rejoicing

Simon: Congratulations, great aunt Elizabeth: I'm getting you into the guinness book of records for the oldest entirely natural birth.

Elizabeth: Thank you, Simon, but be careful how you speak of the Lord's goodness

The Rabbi with his knife, ready to circumcise the child – what am I to name this child?

Everybody: his father is Zechariah so it should be Zechariah... *various shouts* Zechariah....

Elizabeth Certainly Not: he shall be called John

Voices in various ways But not one of your relatives is called John – that name is not in the family at all

Joanna I wish we could ask Zechariah, but there's not much use in that, since he's gone completely dumb - all these months - Poor man, the pregnancy was just too much for him -- no, they can't take it, can they, these men... pregnancy, I mean...

Nathaniel I can do sign language. I'll ask him

Zechariah signs he wants a slate to write on and they give him a flipchart pad –

he writes in big letters and holds it up HIS NAME IS JOHN

everyone gasps, and immediately Z starts speaking,

Z “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

Men He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

Women salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—

Men to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

Women to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Zechariah, taking the baby in his arms,

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,

Everyone the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

They all leave

Scene Six ROME: Augustus's palace

Augustus with officials all in white togas, a slave as Scribe, and the soldiers again with runners – soldiers could do some running

Octavian Augustus – I want some action. Here is the Empire. (*pointing to the map on the wall*) I am responsible for all this. It is my duty to the gods of Rome to bring peace to all this hotch-potch of civilized and half-civilized, barbarian and pagan nations. Not all of these people are Romans, you know. You can't trust them to get on in an orderly fashion by themselves. How can we Romans help them?

Commodus, the transport minister: : By keeping the roads open, Augustus.

Octavian: And what happens when the robbers close them?

Brutus, chief of the general staff: : That's where the army comes in. We patrol up and down the roads, and when we catch them, as we will, we crucify them all along the roadside, like lampposts to warn the population - Rome stands for no nonsense, hundred percent policing.

Octavian: Good – and who pays for all these roads and all this policing? I suppose you expect me to pay for it out the estate my uncle Julius left me? I can't afford it.

Tell me, Statisticus, how many people, how many adults are in the Empire all together?

Statisticus a slave civil servant : I can only guess, Augustus. Maybe 50 million, maybe 100 million – including a lot of children and women and slaves.

Octavian: 50 million... a hundred million – what's that for a poor chap like me who only has ten fingers and has to write numbers the Roman way? Anyway, you don't really know do you?

Statisticus: No, Octavian – it's the perennial pain of the statistician, numbers seem to be hard and simple, but they are really slippery and deceptive.

Octavian: I don't know about numbers being slippery and deceptive, but I warn you, Statisticus, I've got my eye on you, and if you can't be more helpful to me, I'll send you to the saltmines. That's where slippery and deceptive people end up.

Statisticus: Yes, well, I appreciate that, Octavian. I really am doing my best. Really. What is it exactly that you want me to do?

Octavian: It's simple. If you can't tell me how many people there are, so that I can tax them to the limit, then tell me how I can find out how many people I've got. Something must be done. We've inherited such an awful mess from the previous government.

Statisticus: (*this speech can be made with some big visible props- might the big connect four be useful? or pingpong balls, Oxo cubes, and something green*) I can help you with that, Octavian. You see, I like counting things. And what you have to do is to get everything into its proper pile, all the green counters here, and all the red cubes here, and all the white balls there, though that's hard because the white balls are always rolling away. And when you've got them all in the right boxes, you count them. And then you know two things: how many there are and where they all properly belong.

So if you send out a decree, all through the Empire, telling every adult male to get his family together and take them back to his family's traditional home, town or village and to be sure they are there on a certain day – then you can count them all in their

boxes. After that, the tax collectors can go after them and you know how much to insist the tax collectors get for you.

Brutus: Sounds sense to me – even though he is a nerd .

Octavian: Right, Scribe, write the decree and have it sent everywhere. By next year, we shall have money to get this ramshackle empire in better order.

A scribe hands out papers to Runners who go in all directions, handing their bits of paper, like tax demands, to the congregation indiscriminately, saying things like:

Make sure you read this!

No more apathy!

Paying taxes is your highest duty!

Augustus gives us Peace!

One comes to Joseph standing/sitting with Mary at the back

Joseph: What's this? An order from Caesar, in Rome? Why can't he leave us provincials to our own lives? What good does he do us? Oh I see, he says here, He does a lot to help us with roads, and soldiers and crucifixions and wants to do a lot more for us – so he says: Dear Subject of the glorious Roman Empire, Roll up and pay for the great peace I have brought you. Who does he think he's kidding?

Then he says: Take your family to your ancestral village and make sure you get on my register. That means, Mary, we've got to make our famous, eternal journey with the donkey, from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the city of David. What a bind, at this time of the year, and you, so fully pregnant. I'm sorry, this is rough on you.

Mary: Don't worry, Joseph, I'm sure it will be all right. My baby comes from God and he is with us – that bit of paper from the Emperor can't compete with our baby. Anyway, I would like to see your home town – Bethlehem - what meaning it has for all of us Jews who look for God to restore the kingdom!

Joseph: You're a grand woman, Mary. Do you know that? I don't know what I'd do without you.

Mary: Let's get ready then

Scene Seven

Song – Away in a manger - during which a tableau assembles itself on stage, slightly off centre, with a background of a stable roof etc.

In the stable, animals, Mary, and Joseph and the Baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and in a manger. There is no star. It is dark outside.

Mary holds the Baby, Joseph looks on. The cows moo and munch, the horses stamp their feet. They all get on with their own lives in their own way. There is no adoration, certainly no wise men with gifts – this is Luke's account.

There is no speech or action apart from this assembling. The actors can settle themselves comfortably to watch the next scene

Scene Eight - *the hills outside Nazareth, a dark night - where the shepherds and shepherdesses are. .*

For the smaller children: The conversation of the shepherds can be punctuated by the sheep saying Baa Baa like MPs saying Hear Hear – and the sheepdogs can bark if they want to, between speeches, just like the more cantankerous MPs

Joel It's dark tonight.

Nahum Just the night for the rustlers.

Habakkuk They're getting more daring and ruthless.

Amos People are desperate: all this poverty, bad harvest, taxation –

Obadiah No help from the bosses and the rulers.

Micah They are supposed to be shepherds of Israel, but the people don't get looked after.

Amos Still today, it's just as it was in Ezekiel's³ time: remember what he said:

Ho Shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

Obadiah You'd think he was talking about Herod and all those priests and Caesar and all his soldiers and tax-collectors.

Joel And the bankers – don't forget the bankers!

Nahum What we want is God to act against all these bad shepherds, like he promised

Habakkuk Aye, and more: we want God the Good shepherd to come himself and do some shepherding – that's in the promise too: 'I myself will search for my sheep and I will seek them out... I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will gather them and feed them and I will make them lie down in peace and safety and justice.'

Micah But we are still waiting, waiting all through the dark nights. We look after our sheep like good shepherds, but where is the Good Shepherd for us?

The Angel (Gabriel again) appears, with a thunderclap and a flash of lightning.

They are afraid but in the manner of good shepherds, they jump up, with their sticks, look around at their sheep, and move towards the angel with defensive wary aggression

Gabriel moves to calm them

Don't be afraid – I come as a friend bringing good news

Joel Good news, who for?

Angel for everyone, great joy for all the people –

³ Ezekiel 34

Obadiah How's that, then?

Angel Today, in the city of David down there, a baby is born for you

Amos For us? None of our wives is expecting a baby

Angel No, the mother is someone you don't know

Habakkuk So what has it got to do with us? – babies are being born all the time

Angel This baby is born to save you from all troubles you have been talking about. He is Christ the Lord.

Micah The Saviour born today, for us, just down the road?

Angel Yes.

Obadiah Are you just saying this? Or can we see for ourselves?

Angel Yes you can: here's the sign: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying – in a manger.

The shepherds are shocked but don't have time to do anything as all the host of heaven (= the whole congregation) , break out singing in a Carol Medley which is a selection of verses which speak of the shepherds and the message the angel spoke to them (see Appendix 2 for suggestions)

Scene Nine

The Angels go away - i.e, the congregation sit down

Micah Let's go and see

Obadiah The Lord has told us what has happened

Habakkuk Come on, let's get going, this is exciting...

Sing as they walk to the stable tableau

See how the shepherds, summoned to his cradle, leaving their flocks, draw near to gaze; we too will thither bend our joyful footsteps

They march eagerly from their place up to the stable, and they look, and look, and touch the baby – and then suddenly they turn and break apart, going to the four corners of the church, and say as they go, each taking a phrase and repeating the sequence till they come back together :

- 1 The baby lies in a manger,
- 2 the sign that a Saviour has been born,
- 3 Anointed by God,
- 4 announced by the angel,
- 5 shared with poor shepherds,
- 6 peace to all on earth,

Together: Glory be to God

So the shepherds come back, praising God – and take their places with the flock

The tableau remains in place – for the last scene

Scene Ten

Luke and Paul come back to the stage

Luke Well Paul, that's the story. That's how I see it. From the beginning, Jesus brought glory to Israel, the glory of a mission to the world, the glory of living in the promises of God and finding God faithful. And from the beginning, what was rooted in Israel went out as light to the world. And so it will go on to the end of the world.

Paul It's a good story even though I've never included stories about the baby being born when I preach about Jesus – and it is good news for everyone.

Mary appears, without the baby, as an old woman.

Luke Greetings, Mary. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! We have just been telling the story all over again. Do you have anything to say about it?

Mary What can I say? I did not just see it all, from his conception to his death and resurrection. I lived it, I carried him in my body, in my daily care, in following him, in my heart. What do you expect me to say, when I've seen so much, suffered so much, been given so much? I have kept all these things in my heart and pondered them from the beginning, and I shall go on doing that. Your talking and telling stories is all very good, but there is something more than that. Be quiet, ponder what you have heard, make room in your lives for Jesus – there is more in this than you can ever say.....

Appendix 1

The proclamation of Augustus distributed to the congregation by the runners is an A5 sheet. On one side is his caricatured words; on the other the Magnificat. The Gospel is in the contrast between the two sides.

FROM THE EMPEROR IN ROME

TO ALL HIS DEAR SUBJECTS EVERYWHERE

You know I care for you. I help you a lot with roads and free travel and soldiers who crucify the robbers and subversives. I want to do a lot more for you but we are all in this together and so you need to make your contribution.

So go back to your home town – what did I give you roads for? - and register. No one is exempt. Non-compliance will be punished severely.

Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.

Your friendly protector and Caesar,

Octavius Augustus

MARY'S SONG OF REVOLUTIONARY FAITH

My heart is overflowing with praise of my Lord, my soul is full of joy in God my Saviour. For he has deigned to notice me, his humble servant and, after this, all the people who ever shall be will call me the happiest of women! The one who can do all things has done great things for me—oh, holy is his Name! Truly, his mercy rests on those who fear him in every generation. He has shown the strength of his arm, he has swept away the high and mighty. He has set kings down from their thrones and lifted up the humble. He has satisfied the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands. Yes, he has helped Israel, his child: he has remembered the mercy that he promised to our forefathers, to Abraham and his sons for evermore!

Appendix 2 *CAROL MEDLEY*

So to the watchful Shepherds it was told,
Who heard the angelic Herald's voice, "Behold!
"I bring glad tidings of a Saviour's birth,
"To you and all the Nations upon earth:
"This day hath God fulfill'd his promised word;
"This day is born a Saviour, Christ the Lord!

"In David's City, Shepherds, you shall find
"The Long-foretold Redeemer of Mankind!
"Wrapt up in swaddling clothes, the Babe divine"
"Lies in a manger — this shall be the sign."
He spake, and straightway the Celestial Choir
In hymns of joy unknown before conspire.

Angels from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story,
Now proclaim Messiah's birth:
Come and worship,
Come and worship,
Worship Christ, the newborn King!

Shepherds, in the fields abiding,
Watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with man is now residing,
Yonder shines the infant Light;
Come and worship,
Come and worship,
Worship Christ, the newborn King

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, goodwill to men
From heavens all gracious King!"
The world in solemn stillness lay
To hear the angels sing.

O ye beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow;

Look now, for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing;
Oh rest beside the weary road
And hear the angels sing.

For lo! the days are hastening on,
By prophets seen of old,
When with the ever-circling years
Shall come the time foretold,
When the new heaven and earth shall own
The Prince of Peace, their King,
And the whole world send back the song
Which now the angels sing.

While shepherds watched
Their flocks by night
All seated on the ground
The angel of the Lord came down
And glory shone around

"Fear not," he said,
For mighty dread
Had seized their troubled minds
"Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind,"

"To you in David's
Town this day
Is born of David's line
A Savior who is Christ the Lord
And this shall be the sign."

"The heavenly Babe
You there shall find
To human view displayed
All meanly wrapped
In swathing bands
And in a manger laid."

Thus spake the seraph,
And forthwith
Appeared a shining throng
Of angels praising God, who thus
Addressed their joyful song

"All glory be to
God on high
And to the earth be peace;
Goodwill henceforth
From heaven to men
Begin and never cease!"

Hark the herald angels sing
Glory to the new born king;
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies
With the angelic host proclaim
Christ is born in Bethlehem,
Hark the herald angels, Sing
glory to the new born King