

**Monday 25<sup>h</sup> December 2017**  
**Christmas Day (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Isaiah 62.6-end**  
**NT: Titus 3:4-7**  
**G: Luke 2.8,20**

And so, we have arrived Christmas Morning, after all the planning which for some of us started in January, after all the busyness the present buying, the services and carols All the planning and celebrating we have arrived at Christmas, Christmas Morning; the Nativity

As we arrive at the nativity story of Jesus Christ, we encounter an old problem: over-familiarity. It can be hard to re-enchant the stories of shepherds and angels, of Jesus' birth, and so on. At one level, we shouldn't panic – the mystery speaks for itself.

At another level, Luke's account invites us to ponder hard on notions of hospitality, welcome and exile. Famously, Luke says that Jesus was laid in a manger, because there was no room at the 'inn'. While there is little evidence that inns (in the modern sense) existed in Jesus' Judea, we rightly connect this scene with questions of welcome.

Joseph and Mary have been forced to travel to Bethlehem for a census and find themselves there as 'outsiders'. The child Mary is carrying may be 'God with us' (as Matthew describes him), but his birth is much more like that of a refugee in a transit camp than that of a lord or king.

In Luke's account, it is shepherds who are the first group of people to receive the good news of Jesus' birth. Shepherds in Jesus' era are ambiguous figures. In one sense, they are icons. The Old Testament repeatedly uses 'shepherd' as an image of God's protectiveness and love. However, radical theologians have pointed out that shepherds also represent outsiders. As people who could not easily fulfil the requirements of the Law – they lived cheek by jowl with their animals in wilderness places – they were also seen as unrighteous and unclean by many. Symbolically, they are caught in the middle, representing people who can't be seen clearly.

Yet, God calls them to the manger first. God, it seems, doesn't call the obviously privileged, but those who are treated as oddities.

Nobody paid much attention to these guys who smelled like sheep. They didn't have refined social skills. They couldn't bring expensive gifts. They were regular men just like us although probably a bit smellier, they serve as an important reminder that the story of Christmas is not for the world's elite . . . Jesus was born for everyday people like you and me.

We have a lot of questions about the Shepherds:

How many were there?

Did they all go to Bethlehem or did someone stay with the sheep?

How many stables did they have to check before they found the one with Jesus in it?

When they left Bethlehem what happened to the shepherds?

Most likely these shepherds were tending their sheep just outside of Bethlehem. Their job was to guard these sheep from human and animal predators. It was not uncommon for a Shepherd to have to pay for a lost sheep out of his own salary.

The Shepherds would have taken turns on watch during the night. Most likely the watch was three hours in length. It was sometime during the evening that the angels appear.

And the first lesson we need to learn is here; they heard the announcement.

We don't know what time of night it was. Were some of the Shepherds already asleep or were they sitting around the camp fire telling stories we don't know. We have no record of the Shepherds saying anything to the angels. All we know is that they were scared, wouldn't you be?

But it is also important that you see that the Shepherds not only listened to God . . . they took the appropriate action.

When the angels left the shepherds, I suspect they all looked at each other with a dazed expression. I imagine one of them may have said, "did you see what I just saw?" Maybe they discuss it a little. But then there was a decision to make. Look at verses 15-16.

Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. [Luke 2:15-16]

The Shepherds acted on what they heard. They went to see the baby they were told about. They celebrated with joy.

So, the Shepherds were available to hear the message, then they responded appropriately to that message. And when they did, they discovered a wonder that changed their lives. It was a wonder so great that they couldn't help telling everyone they saw.

These shy, backward, smelly shepherds were stopping strangers on the street to tell them about the baby they saw in the manger. Maybe many or most of the people thought they were nuts . . . but they weren't. They were changed.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. [Luke 2:20]

This whole unfolding drama is God's story, and God is the one who should be praised because of it. When the angels leave, the shepherds get up and go into Bethlehem to see with their own eyes the sign that was promised to them. And they find the sign just as it was given, and they begin to share with those around them who were amazed. Just like the angels, the shepherds also depart, and like the angels the shepherds are also praising God and, more than that, they are glorifying God. They are lifting up the one who is already exalted and honoring him with their praises and in this way they glorify God.

The theme of God's glory runs throughout the passage. It is a reminder of God's presence and a reminder of the response God's people make to the gift of a Savior -- a Savior who will defeat the world's enemies by means completely apart from those of the enemy. This is the kind of kingdom and throne signified by a baby lain in a feeding trough.

For many people the celebration of Christmas will end in another week. They will start putting things away and their focus will turn to the changing of the calendar and then to other matters.

They will forget about Christmas until the madness begins again next year.

The shepherds never forgot. Their lives were changed forever by what they saw in Bethlehem.

And I hope yours will be too. I hope you will look past the yearly date on the calendar and begin looking forward to knowing God better. Looking forward to a day when you will stand with others and celebrate the King in person. But let me warn you; when you get there, don't be surprised if you notice the distinct smell of sheep.

Fr Bill Addy