

Tuesday 24 December 2024
Midnight Mass Christmas Eve

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 9:2-7

NT: Titus 2:11-14

Gp: Luke 2:1-20

“I’m as light as a feather, I’m as happy as an angel, I’m as merry as a schoolboy, I’m as giddy as a drunken man. A Merry Christmas to everybody and a Happy New Year to the whole world.” The words of Ebenezer Scrooge as he wakes up on Christmas morning with his life transformed by the experience of the visitation of the spirits.

Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, first published on 19 December 1843 is a story of transformation and rebirth retold many times in film and music and has been responsible for many of the traditions from the Victorian era that we still follow today. Such as family gatherings, seasonal food and drink, dancing, games and a festive generosity of spirit. Such is the impact of *A Christmas Carol* that reworkings of the same story appear each year; two new versions are on television this year alone.

For me, the classic movie version is still the 1951 English version with Alastair Sim in the lead role as Ebenezer Scrooge. This was a particular favourite of my father and him watching it became a Christmas tradition, in its own right, for us.

Dickens' tale of Scrooge's transformation can be seen as an allegory of the Christian concept of redemption and transformation: a man transformed and embracing Christmas in all its aspects. Just like Ebenezer Scrooge, we will go to bed shortly after arriving on Christmas Eve, although I hope that your sleep will not be disturbed this night by any ghosts past, present or future. How we respond to this night will of course depend on how we also see and hear the Christmas story.

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 people just like us, 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 appeared.

We don't know what time of night it was. Were some of the Shepherds already asleep or were they sitting around the campfire 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?

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.

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 them confused 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. 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 Saviour. A Saviour 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.

The temple of the Lord, the dwelling place of God, is now with men, and in men. The pronouncement of God is "here is your Saviour," the very Son of God taking upon himself your nature so you can be assured of the favour of God and the forgiveness of your sins.

The scene ends with the shepherds returning to their work, glorifying, and praising God. They still have work to do, a flock to tend; but they are not the same shepherds. They bear the mark of grace; those who glorify and praise God for Christ, the gift of God for salvation; eternal life with God.

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 transformed forever by what they saw and heard in Bethlehem and through that transformation came action the sharing of the good news.

I hope that your life will also be transformed through the Christmas story. 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