

Shepherds

25 12 13

Almighty God,
you have given us your only-begotten Son
to take our nature upon him
and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin:
grant that we, who have been born again
and made your children by adoption and grace,
may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit.

Our text today may be found in Luke chapter 2 and verse 12:

‘you will find a child
wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in manger.’

In a part of the Romney Marshes in Kent, the shepherds there are called ‘lookers’, lookers because not only do they tend the sheep but they ‘look after’ the land on which their sheep are grazing. Today, briefly, I want to consider again the story you know so well – the lovely story of shepherds out on the hillside tending their flock by night.

The baby has been born. Sometime, earlier that day, the day Christians celebrate on 25th December, the baby Jesus has slipped out his mother’s womb. He’s been washed and wrapped in swaddling clothes and gently laid in a manger to rest after the labour of birth. All this, in the stable of an inn in Bethlehem because there

was no room at the inn itself ! Meanwhile, that night, totally oblivious of what has been going on back in Bethlehem, I imagine our watchful shepherds are sitting around a fire, warming themselves and talking when . . .

When something terrifying occurs ! Something so extraordinary that it frightens the life out of them - a theophany, a God-encounter in the shape of an angel - unnamed, but again I wonder if it's Gabriel working overtime - and all around them shone the glory of the Lord, a bright light rendering the night day.

The first thing the angel says are words of reassurance - 'Don't be afraid' and then he tells them the good news of great joy for all people - 'to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in manger.' Then to confirm the wonderful truth of the angelic apparition, the whole sky lights up and a heavenly host appear to sing God's praises:

'Glory to God in the highest heaven
and on earth peace among those whom he favours'

When they disappear, the shepherds excitedly talk about what they've seen and heard and, careless of their safety, they decide to leave their sheep and go at once down to Bethlehem to see for themselves. They do and there they find things as the angel said. Then the shepherds share with Mary and Joseph what has just happened to them and 'Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.' And that is the story as well you know.

But before I finish, I'd like to draw your attention to a wonderful truth implicit in the story: that it is ordinary, working men, a little beyond the religious pale, who are invited to witness this crossroads moment in our history. Okay, shepherds do have a job and they do have food to eat and clothes to wear but they are hardly rich. Nor can they keep the strict rules about Jewish ritual purity if they are in fact living out in the fields with their sheep 24/7. But it is no accident, no matter of chance, that these men are chosen because the implicit truth of this story is that the birth of Jesus Christ is good news for everyone not just the well-off and the intelligent, the rich and the well-healed. The text says it clearly:

- The angel stood *before them*
- The glory of the Lord shone *around them*
- *to you* is born this day
- this will be a sign *for you*

And so, today, as we remember the birth of Jesus in a stable of an inn in Bethlehem and the visit there of the shepherds who had been told by an angel of his birth, let us remember that the good news of Emmanuel – God with us – is universal, for all people at all times everywhere. But what makes the shepherds special is not their status or lack of it but the fact that they responded: they saw and heard and went to see for themselves. Are we prepared to do as much ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
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