

Date 24/12/2022

Day: Christmas Eve Year A

Congregation: Joint Service at St Chad's, Linwood

First Reading: Isaiah 52: 7-10

Second Reading: Hebrews 1: 1-4

Gospel: Luke 2: 1-20

Among the traditions that I love most about Christmas is hearing the Christmas gospel from Luke with the opening words *'In those days a decree went out from the Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.'* As with all traditions we know what is coming next and yet each time we feel that familiar thrill because something is familiar and yet at the same time so meaningful. And, as with all scriptural readings, when we listen with an open heart we allow something new to stand out for us that gives a new understanding of some aspect of the story.

This week Susanne and I took a communion service for someone in their room in a rest home and when she finished reading the Christmas gospel the person just looked at us and gave a big smile and I found myself on the brink of tears. Because this person has lost the power of speech and yet in their smile I recognised that feeling of how familiar the story is and yet how special to hear

again the wonderful account of the birth of Jesus. At that moment we can think 'Yes! Jesus is born!' and the real celebration of Christmas can begin.

There was no such tradition or familiarity of narration for the shepherds who were out in the fields the night of Jesus' birth. Until the sudden appearance of the angel before them in the dark fields there was no sign that this night was going to be different to any other, no hint of the momentous events that they were about to be drawn into.

As the first outsiders to hear about the birth the shepherds are the most important witnesses to Jesus' birth. They do not know the family and they know nothing of the sequence of events that has led Mary and Joseph to this moment – and so they are the valuable independent eyewitnesses to what they find in the manger after they follow the encouragement of the angel and go to see for themselves what has happened.

What they would have known, however, is of the long standing promise from God for a Messiah for the Jewish people. But they would never have expected the realisation of that promise in their home city, in their lifetime – and that they would be the witnesses to it.

I believe there is significance in the choice of the shepherds to be the ones told of Jesus' birth and encouraged to go and see the truth of it for themselves. The angel didn't just look around to find someone who was awake that night to whom they could announce the news, the shepherds were chosen to receive it.

The role of a shepherd was one that Jesus, in his adult life, would use to describe his own ministry, and indeed the image of God as a shepherd can be found in the Old Testament also. We find one of the most familiar images in Psalm 23 where the psalmist describes the Lord as his shepherd, but there are other examples in the scriptures - from Genesis through to Revelation - where God is depicted as the shepherd and humans as the sheep being cared for.

The connection between the infant Jesus and the shepherds doesn't end there.. The way that the shepherds lived and cared for their sheep is a metaphor for how Jesus will conduct his earthly ministry. Consider how shepherds lived and cared for their flock.

Firstly, as we hear in the reading, they lived among their sheep. There was no clocking off at 5pm and going home for the night; they stayed with the flock to guard them from the predators, from anything that could threaten them in the darkness. And that is the very thing that God sent Jesus to do too; to live among us in order to guard us from the things that worry us in the dark times of our lives. No matter what things spring out to cause us sleeplessness at night through guilt or doubt; no matter what feelings of pain or fear that beset upon us during the day, we know because of the incarnation that we joyously celebrate tonight that Jesus continues to live among us. That means that we can turn to Jesus at any time for comfort and support to enable us to not just survive, but to flourish. Like any of the shepherds visited by the angel, Jesus the shepherd cares for us at all times and in all circumstances of our

lives, desiring to protect us and keep us safe from the things that could threaten our spiritual lives.

But shepherds did not just guard those within the flock; as we hear in a parable that Jesus told in Matthew's gospel, a caring and conscientious shepherd will leave the flock in order to seek out one who has got itself lost and to reunite it with the flock. And so it is with Jesus; he searches for those who have become separated from God and invites them back into the divine relationship.

Shepherds – at the time of the Nativity – were considered by some to be outcasts because of their lifestyle and because they were unable to maintain the ritual cleanliness required for worship in the Temple. But they were considered by God to be suitable witnesses to the birth of the Messiah; the first to be told and the first to visit, even before those Magi who would bring expensive gifts to honour the Messiah. Jesus, in his earthly ministry, would find himself outcast by those who set and maintained the religious morals of the day and who strongly defended any threat to their power. His experience of the discrimination and abuse of power by those who

kept it tightly in their grip is another example of how Jesus identifies with all who are oppressed by malignant power.

Jesus was humbly born to unassuming parents and his birth was witnessed to by simple shepherds. That makes a clear statement that his coming to earth was for all people, not solely for the religious elite or the rich and powerful. The shepherds were terrified of the angel at first and would not have expected a welcome if they tried to visit any new-born baby, let alone the Messiah. The angel anticipated this, however, assuring them that they would find this Messiah in a manger, a very humble bed for a child. That was indeed a sign for them that they could visit the baby and see for themselves.

Tonight, as we joyously welcome the Christ Child, let us honour the shepherds and the role they played in the birth of Jesus. The lowly ones who were the first to be told and the first to welcome Jesus. The shepherds, whose life style and care for their charges can be seen in how Jesus conducted his earthly ministry. From that we can take away from here tonight the knowledge that Jesus lives with us

constantly to protect us, guides us back when we have become separated from God, and turns the notion of power on its' head to show who and what is important.

Furthermore we are invited to 'go and see for ourselves' just as the shepherds were. And as you do so may you find – in the baby laying in the manger – the humble Messiah who is there for all people.

Shepherd (Lisa Debney)

Until tonight
I could not fit the size of God
into my head.
I thought he was a God
for prophets and kings,
men of words and wisdom.
But tonight I am looking at God made small,
small enough for me,
small enough to pick up
and hold like a lamb.
I could not talk to a God in the clouds;
but tonight when I look and smile
and talk nonsense to this
tiny thing, I know that I am
talking to God.
And it is God who smiles
back at me and waves his
perfect hands in delight.
And tonight in your smallness, God,
you seem bigger and more powerful
to me than you ever did before.
I can hold you now,
hold you in my head
and hold you in my arms,
and know that you are holding me in yours.

Yes! Jesus is born! So let the real celebration of Christmas begin.