

Sermon on Sunday 27 December

by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Readings: Isaiah 61.10–62.3 and Luke 2.15-21

A Call to our Hearts



You have settled in for the evening and have in your mind to prepare a straightforward favourite to eat. The sun has set, the curtains are drawn you snuggle down on the sofa in front of the fire and chat to the family or switch on the radio. Suddenly the phone rings and someone says come round we are going out ... stargazing... there's been a report on the News. Can you be bothered?

The Shepherds are on the hillside, the sheep safely gathered for the night, sitting round a fire having eaten a simple meal and chatting quietly, and after a very, long day on the hills they are ready to get some sleep.

When suddenly an angel appears with a message: I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the 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 for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' Queue lights, a multitude of heavenly angels and singing.

Thank heavens the Shepherds don't say they can't be bothered or think that it is safer to stay here and not get involved in all of this. What would have happened if the Shepherds had an evaluation meeting and decided that the priority was guarding the sheep for x number of shepherds and

someone being detailed to watch the fire, and the remaining shepherds to sleep so that they could take over in the day?

Instead, the response of at least one group was 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' It was not "let's sit down and decide and discuss the pro's and con's", nor was it "we will wait until tomorrow", nor "maybe we will take our flocks closer to the town and drop by"; but 'let's go now'. Secondly, they go in 'haste' - they really want to see this Lord and Messiah, this Saviour. Nothing is going to put them off or delay them. They take what they have - some sheep as gifts. Thirdly they get something of the momentous reality of the child as it lays swaddled and helpless but speaks of God and the whole world; the child evokes the response of worship.

Our reading is the end of the section on the birth of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. It begins with the Roman Census necessitating the journey to Bethlehem, resulting in the birth in humble circumstances and Jesus lying in a manger, the proclamation to the Shepherds in the fields and ends with their worshipping the child. The image of the manger bookends the proclamation to the angels. It is an image from the Old Testament. In Isaiah chapter 1, verse 3 God's complaint against Israel is: "The ox knows its owner and the donkey knows the manger of its Lord; but Israel has not known me, and my people have not understood me."

Luke, the writer of the Gospel, has recorded the birth of Jesus in a way that helps us to understand the Good News of the angels. Luke is saying that this is no longer the case. When the Good News that the Messiah and Lord has been born and lies in a manger is proclaimed, the shepherds go to him and worship. This is a new beginning - when God's people know the manger of their Lord in a new and immediate way. In one word: Jesus.

The initiation of the plan by God to bring about a new relationship with human beings is through the simple yet profound birth of a child who is His Son. You can complicate it with a major theological study of the doctrines or teachings of the incarnation, the redemption and the Trinity but none of this stopped the Shepherds. The Shepherds simply went to meet Jesus - Yeshua- the one who saves. So full of hope and joy, they return 'glorifying and tell others.'

In this child, there is enough hope and peace for all the world. He will and will continue to manifest the love of God in such a way that all mankind will see the nature of God more clearly, he will open his arms on the cross to open the door of salvation for all mankind. Love waits for love, he waits for our love for Him and for us to love each other.

This Christmas we have heard the call of the angels. In the words of Christina Rossetti,

*Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;*

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.*

(Acknowledgement to An Adult Christ at Christmas: R. E. Brown)