

Luke 2: 15-21

Story of my grandfather and the sheep...

My grandfather for part of his life farmed land in the Chlitrans. It was a mixed farm and amongst the other activities he ran a flock of about 100 sheep with the help of his two collies, Flossie and Nell. During the War a searchlight battery and gun emplacement were placed on a field on his farm, as it was under one of the frequent routes flown by German bombers. If you had a searchlight on your land it could be quite dangerous as the incoming enemy would try to knock out the lights to prevent the anti-aircraft guns from being able to fire. ***“We learnt quite quickly”*** he told us some years later, ***“to move out of the fields as soon as the lights came on, but the first time it happened was around Christmas time and,” he said, “it got me thinking about the Christmas story.”*** Apparently he was out in the field with the two dogs, checking the sheep. It was an ordinary December night: fairly clear and cold: no moon, but the stars were twinkling. There was no heavenly chorus, but there was a sudden sound of the siren wailing and then the big beam of light came on. It was startling for him and the sheep, but the dogs remained calmly on duty. He always said that he could imagine at that point how afraid the shepherds outside Bethlehem must have been, when light and sound suddenly filled the air of an otherwise still night. How extreme the peace seemed when it all closed down again. No bombs fell, no guns fired that night, but as the fear subsided he said he felt safe and almost happy under that canopy of night sky with a sense of God’s presence around him, even in the chaos of wartime. How much we need to feel that presence in the current circumstances of the world.

Now I realize that’s not quite the Christmas Story of the Shepherds, but there is a sense of the blanket of night, the initial shock of the presence of an angel chorus and the reassurance that he need not be afraid. Of course he wasn’t running to Bethlehem to declare the birth of Christ, but only to the edge of a field, but the effect was profound and he passed the story on to his family with empathy for shepherds on the fields at night. He also said that he was sure they must have had dogs with them so that they could run off to the stable and leave the sheep to be cared for – who knows?!

What is likely is, that on the occasion of Jesus’ birth, it was just another ordinary working night for the shepherds. The sheep were ordinary sheep, the shepherds (unnamed in the Bible) were ordinary shepherds. Shepherds were not the powerful people in the land, not learned, not important and actually unable to follow the Sabbath rules because they were out on the hills and thus (even though it was not their fault) they were likely to be seen as unclean by the religious authorities. The people who set and interpreted the Jewish Law had not, it seems, factored into their rulings their own history, in which King David himself was a shepherd boy – called in from the fields to be anointed as the future King by the prophet Samuel (and then sent back out to work!).

Anyway, you can imagine the scene: An anonymous group of men and boys around the fire, supper time perhaps and the sheep grazing, or lying in the scrubby land behind them. Another night to follow all the other nights. No moon this night, but stars above them, chillily at that time of yearand then ... suddenly ... in the middle of the darkness came the light an explosion of light and sound. And that’s where our Gospel today picks up the story The shepherds: not chasing a star, not now surrounded by angelic hosts, but uplifted and transformed by what they have experienced, leaping up to go and find this child. It was just as much a calling for them to come immediately, as Jesus’ later invitation to his disciples to leave their workplaces and follow him. They ran towards Bethlehem. It was no longer an ordinary night,

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but they were no longer ordinary people. They were chosen to be the first recipients of the Good News: only Mary and Joseph knew who the child was before the shepherds did.

The shepherds risked everything to obey their God and to find him in the manger. They ran through the darkness to find a place with a baby in a manger, to find the light amongst the houses of the sleeping town. Then, after they were filled with the joy and excitement of their discovery of the Christ Child, after they knelt to worship the Messiah, The Lord, they were not silent. They excitedly confirmed to everyone around them, inside the stable and outside what the angels had told them and what they had seen. They clearly weren't silent and in that busy town of Bethlehem many people undoubtedly heard the story and were amazed, but inside the stable perhaps it was most meaningful to Mary who took it to heart, because it confirmed her own understanding of the birth of her baby. We're told that after 8 days she and Joseph took the baby to be circumcised as tradition dictated and named him Jesus in confident obedience, (reinforced by the shepherds' words) to what the angel had told her. The shepherds returned in due course to their lives on the hills, but lives that were I think, never the same again because they were chosen to be part of God's plan and their faithful response to that calling changed the world. It is good to hear their story, but Christmas reminds us that we too must look and listen in the darkest of times and in the light too, if we are to find Jesus and offer him a place in our lives

The Shepherds were semi-nomadic, of no fixed abode for much of the year and yet God chose them to witness to the birth of Jesus. They were in effect, the first to confirm the prophecies of the Messiah. They weren't chosen for their academic learning, or for their political importance, or for their religious authority. Far from it. They were chosen because their life on the hills separated them from the materialism of the towns and brought them closer to the Creator God. They communicated their own joy and excitement at this amazing news. The shepherds were not inhibited, not afraid to say what they had seen. They spoke from the heart because their news was so joyful. Even though the joy they communicated is set in one period, it can of course be shared universally in time or space. We should in faith feel this joy much of the time, but it is **good** to use the Christmas Season to refuel our faith, to treasure the story in our hearts and to build our confidence to remind ourselves and others of the power of our Good News.

If we can **feel** the renewed joy of Christ's birth in our hearts, then we can sing his praises in great faith and we can give ourselves the confidence to be content to be ordinary, because to be ordinary with God is always to be extraordinary. We can be open to whatever he calls us to do: simple or grand.

Our God was born in a stable. The powerful people were sleeping, but the humble and faithful were kneeling in worship. We can therefore give thanks for the obedience of Mary and Joseph; for the faithfulness of the shepherds and we can sing of our joy with the carols of Christmas and then we can run confidently, called by God into a New Year.