

HE COMES TO THOSE WHO NEED HIM

Isaiah 9. 2-7
 Titus 2. 11-14
 Luke 2. 1-14

I speak to you in the name of the † Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
 Amen.

A friend of mine, a mature priest with decades and decades of experience, is of the opinion that preaching a sermon on Christmas Eve is not really necessary. According to this friend (who is in fact a bishop), it is enough to read or tell St Luke's account of the birth of our Lord, and then allow the carols, the candles and Christ incarnate in the bread and wine to proclaim the 'good news of great joy for all the people' (Lk 2. 10-11).

If any of you happen to agree with my friend, I'm afraid that you will be disappointed this evening, because at St Stephen's we do indeed have a sermon at Midnight Mass (although I promise to keep it short). But my friend's comment leads us to ask the question, 'What would we really like to hear in a Christmas Eve sermon?' And I imagine that at least some of us would say, 'We'd like to hear something memorable; something of consequence; something that will startle us.'

In order to achieve that, I invite you to take a fresh look at St Luke's well-known text that recounts the Christmas story. We read, 'In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – 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"' (2. 8-11).

Now you probably know this already, but in Jesus's time, shepherding was not a highly-regarded occupation. It had become a profession that was most likely to be filled from the bottom rung of the social ladder. Generally, shepherds were people who could not find decent work. Society stereotyped shepherds and considered them to be liars, degenerates and thieves. The testimony of shepherds was not admissible in court, and many towns had ordinances that barred shepherds from their city limits.

What's more, the Jewish religious establishment took a particularly dim view of shepherds, since the regular exercise of their duties kept them from observing the Sabbath and rendered them ritually unclean. The Pharisees, who belonged to a party of very conservative Jews, put shepherds in the same category with tax collectors and prostitutes; they were all people who were 'sinners' by virtue of their vocation.

So we see that the announcement of Christ's birth is given to people who were considered to be total 'outsiders'. The angel of the Lord could have appeared to those who were in political power – Emperor Augustus, and Quirinus, the governor of Syria – but he did not. Or the angel could have given the announcement about Jesus's birth to the Jewish religious authorities in the Temple, people like the high priests Ananias and Caiaphas; but he did not. Instead, the angel was directed to reveal this glorious news to outcasts of society, to poor unsuspecting shepherds who were tending their flocks in the fields.

The fact that Christ came to the earth is, of course, very good news indeed for all of us, 'for all the people', just as the angel said. But the appearing of the angel to the shepherds reminds us that God comes – and our Lord comes – to those people who need him. This Christmas, Jesus wants to reveal his birth to those of us *who need him most*. I don't know about you, but for me, this is something that is worth remembering. It is news of consequence. It is even startling.

Why is it startling? Because it means that Christ desires to reveal himself not only to those of us who are gathered this Christmas in a beautiful church like this one; or to those of us who are celebrating Christmas in our warm homes, around an inviting fireplace and a brightly-decorated tree. It means that our Lord wants to reveal himself to *everyone*, including those of us who are ‘out there’ in the fields, if you like: those of us who are isolated or lonely, those of us who are disenfranchised, those of us who feel forgotten, those of us who are grieving, or those of us who find ourselves in a place of spiritual wilderness. The good news is that Jesus comes to reveal himself to us even *there*. He brings great joy to those who *need it most, even there*.

And Christ does even more than that. He reveals himself to those who think that they are not even worthy of being classed as ‘outsiders’. He reveals himself to those who have been shunned by decent, ‘religious’ folk; to those who have been disappointed by God; to those who have (quite frankly) stopped *caring* about being outsiders. Our Lord comes to reveal himself to those who have completely given up on religion; to those who have completely given up on God, and who have just got on with their lives. Jesus comes to reveal himself to those of us who are like them. Why? Precisely because God never gives up on us. Yes, Christ comes to us; and when he does, we need not be afraid; because when he does so, it is in a way that is not at all frightening. We need not be ‘terrified’, as the shepherds were at first, in the presence of the angel.

Jesus comes to us in vulnerability and in helplessness, as a ‘child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger’ (2. 12). When Jesus came to the earth, he was born like any other baby, but he was born among the lowly and the poor. In St Luke’s account, there is nothing special about Jesus’s birthplace. He was born on the road and laid in a feeding trough for animals. Initially, there were no Wise Men at the manger scene. No angels were there, because the angels were over in the field with

the shepherds. In fact, Mary and Joseph only heard about all the angelic activity when the shepherds told them, and they were amazed.

Yes, the story of the babe born in Bethlehem is excellent news; and it is excellent news not only for those of us who (like the shepherds) are outsiders. It is also life-changing news for those of us who have been outside so long that we have given up on God. It is hopeful news for those of us who think that God has given up on us.

But he has not. This Christmas, Jesus comes to reveal himself to each of us. God never gives up on those whom he loves.

Amen.