

27 December 2020
Isaiah 61.10 – 62.3

Christmas 1
Galatians 4.4-7

10am Christ Church
Luke 2.15-21

Why Shepherds?

We all love a good story. We all appreciate a good storyteller. The four individuals who wrote our four gospels were very skilled storytellers. Each tells his story in his own way as he tries to get across what is good news about Jesus. One, Mark, the action man, doesn't have time for a Christmas story; he's in such a hurry to share his good news. John is a very reflective character. He doesn't have much of a Christmas story. But he does introduce us to Jesus with a theological, even philosophical, discussion about the incarnation. 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us....' Matthew's approach is different again. He does tell us of the birth of Jesus, but there's no mention of a stable or shepherds, just the wise men and the need to flee to escape a murderous king Herod.

It's in Luke's Gospel, from which we read on Christmas morning and again this morning, that we encounter most of the familiar features of the Christmas story – the journey to Bethlehem for the census; the difficulty in finding accommodation; the new-born child being placed in a manger; and the shepherds. And we realise that there are quite a few bits missing from that list for they don't appear in the Bible at all – the ox and the ass, the shepherds bringing their sheep with them to visit Jesus, for example. They are examples of the storytellers' skill embroidering the story to give it a bit of extra impact, merging Matthew's account and Luke's account and adding a good bit of imagination. But Luke does give us the shepherds. Just as Matthew gives us the wise men. Perhaps next Sunday, the feast of the epiphany, we will be thinking about the wise men and what they signify. But today the shepherds. Why does Luke introduce shepherds into the story? What's their significance – both for Luke's story and for us as we read it?

Is Luke making the point that the first people to greet Jesus were not the rulers, or the upper classes, not celebrities, or the rich and famous, but lowly manual workers, on the fringes of society. The shepherds may or may not of been regarded as ritually unclean, but they were certainly smelly, and weren't very popular. Being a shepherd wasn't quite the up-market occupation that we might think from King David and the 23rd Psalm! They were outsiders in their local community. But these were the people who were told who the new born child was. The Messiah, the Lord, the saviour. God comes to the outsider, privileges

the outsider. Just as he does today. Comes to the homeless and jobless, the refugee and asylum seeker, the undervalued key worker. So perhaps that is one of the points Luke wants to make by introducing shepherds into the story.

But there's more. Luke also uses the shepherds to communicate the Christmas message: good news, great joy for all the people, the birth of a Saviour, the birth of the Messiah. Sharing that message not just with Mary and Joseph (who would surely welcome this confirmation of what they had been told about the birth of Jesus) but also with others there in the house with the baby. Luke is using the shepherds as an important device to introduce Jesus as the Messiah, but not the sort of Messiah expected by the Jews. It's important to Luke's story to make this point very early on.

And he may also be doing rather more. A little earlier, as we heard on Christmas Day, Luke has introduced us to Emperor Augustus. He was at the summit of the power of the Roman Empire. By the time Luke was writing his gospel several decades later the authority of the Romans had crucified Jesus; the crucified Jesus had risen from the dead, demonstrating he really was Son of God. The life changing message of Jesus the Son of God was spreading across the Roman empire. Before too many centuries passed the Christian faith would become the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. And Luke starts it here in the Christmas story, with the message to the shepherds. Right at the beginning he sets the scene for what will happen. And the shepherds are an important part of him setting the scene as they introduce us to the Messiah.

And perhaps Luke is also using the shepherds telling their story as a means of stressing the importance of sharing the good news of an encounter with God. If they hadn't come down from the hills to tell of their encounter that night, what then? The question remains to challenge us.

Mary pondered these things in her heart, Luke tells us. She must have been pondering pretty much full time ever since her encounter with the Angel that we call the Annunciation. And as Jesus grew up and as Jesus went about his teaching and preaching and healing ministry she must have continued to ponder. And as she sat beneath the cross when Jesus was crucified, she must have continued to ponder. What was God up to?

And what, we might wonder, had the others who heard the Shepherd's message that night, made of it? Had they pondered it? Or had they dismissed it as the ravings of the outcasts?

And what, we might ask ourselves, are we making, this strange Christmas, of the message we hear again? A message that has become so familiar that its radical nature and challenge can so easily be blunted and wash over us. Will we let it wash away or will we, like Mary, ponder it in our hearts?

Christina Rossetti's beautiful poem 'In the bleak midwinter' speaks of the shepherds and their response to the infant child. Like every good poet she's bringing imagination to the story.

What can I give Him, poor as I am? she wrote

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 Him my heart.