



Christmas Day
25 December 2011

Listen

A sermon by Revd Clare Herbert

Readings: Isaiah 52.7-10; Luke 2.1-20

Listen, your watchmen raise their voices,
They shout for joy together!

Sometimes when I am wandering around London, perhaps about to enter some rather sophisticated space like a theatre or art gallery or restaurant, I look down at what I am wearing and remember myself as a child paddling around the streets of the market town where I grew up, on the bleak northern edge of Dartmoor, between Okehampton and Launceston. And I grin ruefully to myself when I do so because half a century later I am not able to wean myself off trainers, or jeans or anoraks, not really, not able to shed farming clothes, the clothes of the fields.

It rains all the time on the northern edge of Dartmoor so sheep is just about all that will grow! So my neighbours' annual and daily calendar revolved around sheep counting, sheep feeding, sheep dipping, sheep sheering and of course lambing. I have a soft spot therefore for shepherds! By the time I was growing up they had exchanged boot leather for Land Rovers, of course. But not much else had changed – shepherding still demanded strength, discipline, razor sharp eyes, and kindness. It would be sentimental of me to suggest that all sheep farmers are kind – but counting sheep involves calling them, sometimes even by name so they have to want to come to you. And lambing is so close to child birth in so many intimate ways that the firm gentleness needed to tend the ewes and lambs tends to rub off in part. Shepherds may be shy of human conversation but they certainly know the mess of flesh and blood and birth too well to be embarrassed by an exhausted mother and a new born lying in a manger.

What I notice about these shepherds is this:

They are where the message of God's holiness breaking into our story is given in Luke's Gospel. In other Gospels the Word is made flesh in stately poetry, or kings flash by for Matthew in golden robes and crowns. In our own lives in the run up to Christmas glory tends to shine in nice places, lights go down, mangers glow softly and angel wings beat about the heads of choirs, but here in Luke's story of Christmas the glow of divine presence is in the fields among the shepherds tending the sheep! Luke states categorically God is with his small people, his poor ones, his on the edge never able to get to religious services ones, the needy ones for whom he came, the working farming folk from whom Israel's great King David sprang. Two Old Testament themes are picked up here – God being alongside the anawin, the small insignificant people and the poor having good news preached to them. The angel voices sing there! It is the shepherds who hear the message of the angels and it is they who begin to spread it around. In fact it is they who tell Joseph and Mary about the meaning of their child's birth! Mary and Joseph just get on doing parent things in difficult circumstances – the shepherds are the first on the night of the birth to be given a glimpse of the glory behind it all! It is enough to makes you think! First question to unwrap when you have time to pause this Christmas - Who acts as messenger of God to me, to you?

The shepherds are exuberant and afraid all at the same time. I love this detail of discussing what to do next! They run to Bethlehem to see for themselves, and tell what they have seen, giving Mary a headache and something to think about for a long time to come. They respond generously to the

over-spilling gracious revelation of God to them. They give it away excitedly. I am reminded of the sheep farmers at lambing time chatting fervently at farm gates and over market stalls about how many lambs were born last night, what time they had to get up, what went wrong and where, how so and so next door is faring in the floods, or so and so up the hill in the snow. And again in Luke's Gospel the emphasis is on the ordinary – the sign of the divine among them is precisely not gold or harp or fluttering wing but a child lying all wrapped up in a feeding trough – a child such as **they** would see at home, a child looking for all the world like a shepherd's child, lying simply dressed where animals feed. A child they would recognise as theirs, about to save Israel. "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government shall rest upon his shoulder." It is enough to make you think. A second question for you to unwrap when you have time this Christmas Time! Who carries out the promises of God to me, to you?

And they go back grateful – back to where they belong, the cold and the fire and the counting and the feeding and the lambing. They go back to their ordinary place to respond in whatever stumbling hesitant small way they can to what they have learnt, to what they have seen and known for themselves, to what they realise they have been given. Just so we go back today, after all the rumpus of carols and bands and shopping and wrapping and waiting – to our ordinary circumstances, perhaps a family or hotel meal, perhaps a friend or two to share with, or a quiet day alone, perhaps a holiday day spent in a foreign city or a friend's kitchen where there's lots to do. Wherever we go let us ponder with Mary what there is to be thankful for in our life and in our world's life. Let us praise God with the shepherds for what we have been given and consider where we have glimpsed God. Let us see beneath the skin of God's small ones their closeness to him and see the light, shining all around, from the face of one who will become our Good Shepherd.

I was very fortunate in my faith, if not perhaps sartorially - growing up among such people and in that countryside with all the resonances it held with the origins of Christianity and with tales which Jesus told. The woman for whom I first worked – I was hopeless at sheep farming by the way, better far at the chat and cheer necessary to do a milk round, and at the prayer and study necessary for the pulpit – was dotty about sheep, really dotty. She toasted before her own hearth lambs born too tiny to manage life in ice and snow, and bottle fed those orphaned or rejected at birth. She knew her sheep by name and they obeyed her voice. She, and the farmers around me, gave me an image of the Good Shepherd who will grow from this tiny child lying in a manger, to be strong and disciplined and kind enough to lay down his life for us, our Lamb of God, our bread and wine, our food, whom we receive with joy this Christmas morning.

The shepherds said to one another, "Let us go, even to Bethlehem, to see this thing which has come to pass, and the babe, lying in the manger." Thanks be to God!