

## The Shepherds

### Sermon on Xmas Eve 2007



The picture on our service sheet tonight is from China. The Christmas carol we've just sang is a Polish carol, letting us know that Christ was born for us.

Some of the prayers we speak and hear are from the Iona Community in Scotland. And the drums the children played are from West Africa.

Truly international, don't you think?

The message however, is one for all of us, in all those different parts of the world we are coming from or we are connected with. The message is one and the same at all times.

There is a baby born for us... and this little thing is the Lord of all.

Breathtaking in itself, isn't it?

But if we are not careful the Xmas story will not hold any surprises for us anymore. It will be too familiar, and we will be too used to half-listening to it being read in Xmas services or being sung in the well-known Xmas carols. There are so many images we are given over the years; biblical stuff, but also legends from other resources.

Often we are mixing them all up...

and cannot really tell who brought the presents to the stable, or –

what is even more important – who was present, when Jesus was born?

In Luke's gospel there is no innkeeper mentioned, nor are there ox and donkey and other animals. The shepherds did not bring any presents, but the kings in the gospel of Matthew did.

There was no drummer boy at the stable near the Jesus child. And it can't have been icy cold snow covered deep midwinter, as we Europeans like to sing, because Jesus was born in Bethlehem, - and this is obviously part of the Middle East where it hardly ever snows.

We could go on like this...

but instead I would like to invite us all to look at the verses from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the gospel of Luke, as if we read or heard them for the very first time.

Let us pretend we had never heard them, before we came to church today.

And by doing so, let us try to catch some of their surprise.

And let us read and hear them as who ever we are today. Whether we are well prepared for this season, or whether we are in the middle of everyday down to earth tasks that do not really allow nostalgic and romantic feelings arise... whether we are caught in worries, sorrows, pain... and cannot really experience the peace and joy that we'd expect there to be at Xmas.

Therefore my prayer this Xmas is:

Teach me to be open God  
that I may learn  
to seek you in the unexpected,  
look for you in the unrecognised,  
touch you in the different.  
At this moment,  
help me to find you,  
O God, right here, in this church, in this story...

So let's dive into this annually repeated story and discover how amazing it really is: this story of God's love not only for some shepherds, but also this story of God's love for us.

Let us focus on God's announcement of the birth of his son.

Who does he invite to come and see the new baby?

A strange collection of shepherds...

They are the only ones who are invited.

The announcement to them is the only one in Luke's records, the only time at which people are invited to come and visit Mary and Joseph and the baby. And this one and only invitation goes to a bunch of uneducated, smelly, low-class, social and religious outcasts...

Let me tell you a bit about shepherds.

This may help us, to try to imagine, where God would be born, if he was born in this place and time...

In the time when Jesus was born, shepherds were the last people you'd expect God to take notice of. They were the religious outcasts.

According to Jewish religious law, these men were unclean.

Their work prevented them from participating in the feasts and holy days which was a serious duty for the Jews. When everyone else was making the trip to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the temple, or to participate at one of the annual feasts, the shepherds were out in the fields, watching over the sheep...

They were so outcast that they didn't even fall under the census... presumably there existed a class of people in the Roman Empire who didn't get counted... weren't considered people...

Since the shepherds were constantly on the move to find new pastures for their flocks, they were looked upon with suspicion... often being accused of being thieves. If something came up missing – it must have been those shepherds... They were not permitted to give testimony in a legal process, because their word wasn't considered trustworthy.

(Later in the story of Jesus' birth it is the task of the shepherds to spread the good news, and people believe them:

*17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.)*

Shepherds didn't really have much contact with other people. They were living out in the fields, and their job was not a 40 hour week, but a 24 hours per day, seven days a week occupation.

Being a shepherd was lonely, wearing, tedious... and at times dangerous – surely not the sunny side of life at all, but much contact with those who lived in darkness.

What surely surprises us now and surprised Christians of all generations is that God wants to announce the most amazing, incredible, joyous news ever among those outcasts first.

The birth of the one who literally changes the course of history, who will be the saviour of the whole world first talked about among those who were not even regarded worthy of being counted...

What a privilege to those shepherds!

They not only see one angel who has a message just for them, but they also see the joyful excitement of the flock of singing angels.

They must have told the story of that night for years to come...

What a good thing there were several of them!

One shepherd on his own would certainly never have been believed.

Was it the mystery of angels meeting shepherds, or shepherds meeting angels, that made the miracle come true? As soon as the angels vanish, the shepherds set off to find the baby.

They do not ask any of the sensible questions, like “why would God send hosts of angels to tell a bunch of shepherds what he is doing?” They catch the news of the moment and run to do as they are told.

The project “Getting God Born” is started under the exclusion of the beautiful and the mighty. No political leaders, no honourable religious scholars, no priests, rabbis, popes. No military parades, no mass media – none of all that when God is born!

God is working to bring the human world and heaven back together again. And he starts at the lowest point imaginable at the time of Jesus' birth: the fields of Bethlehem.

...leaves us of course to ask where the fields of Bethlehem are today...

Still in Bethlehem?

Oh, yes....

And nearby in Iraq.

But also in Sierra Leone, in Congo, in Togo and so many other places, where the life of a person doesn't count at all, where corruption and criminal leadership ruin country and population.

And when those suffering from the conditions in these fields of Bethlehem manage to flee to us, the Palestinians in the asylum seekers' home in Baierbrunnerstrasse, the families from Congo and Togo, the women from Nigeria,

the men from Sierra Leone, the places where they are put here are similarly dark as those they've just managed to escape from.

Being in darkness and outcast marks the fields of Bethlehem.

Not being seen or recognised, handled like a piece of something or a number rather than a human being shows who our society values and who it does not...

God could be born in an asylum seekers' home, and the first ones to see would be all the other refugees who are as homeless as he is...

or in prison and those who'd discover his birth first would be the other female prisoners in the neighbouring prison cells.

God could be born in the streets of Sao Paulo and put in a card board box to sleep and find rest.

Or God could be the son of a mother in South Africa suffering from HIV Aids. A few days after his birth he would be orphaned through her death, and his older brothers and sisters would raise him and care for him...

God born in such or other places...

And when would we notice?

Would we be close enough to the stable and the fields in order to catch the good news?

Does this give us enough of a clue where God wants to begin to change the world?

It is such an unusual, revolutionary plan that in the biblical stories God needs the angels to help the plan come true.

God is doing something so unexpected that simple human beings are going to need a lot of help if they are to believe that this is true.

God is sending his son to be born as a baby.

God the creator is coming to live as part of his creation.

God shows us in Jesus how to live in the world of human beings, and how to make a permanent connection again between God and his people.

With the birth of Jesus, God will one day walk on the earth again, and talk to people...

But before it comes to that, before God can stand on his own feet and walk and talk, the God in the newborn baby still needs a lot of love and care.

In a beautiful piece of writing about the shepherds after their encounter in the stable, one shepherd says:

"I tell you we didn't know what we would find at the end of our journey. We thought we knew. We had our expectations."

And his friend answers:

"It was not as we thought it would be, and we will never be the same again."  
...that is surely right for all people who meet God. We will never be the same again!

The same shepherd remembers that they had no gifts to bring and that when they were finally at the stable, they wondered seriously whether they'd always imagined their God too small.

*This really surprises me: standing in front of the baby God, the red and wrinkly new born, and already there noticing and sensing his greatness!!! Isn't that extraordinary!?*

A bit further on in the piece a third shepherd says:

“We were drawn to an out-of-the way place, to a side street, to a one-roomed house with an animal stall and a feeding trough... and a young girl exhausted from the pain and terror of giving birth...”

And his friend adds:

“We felt at home in that place, more at home than we had ever felt before!”  
*...how could they not, I ask – if you stand in front of the living God...*

And at the end of this shepherds' piece, I am quoting from, one of the oldest shepherds says:

“I still carry God in my arms. From now on I carry God in my arms in all I do; when I climb down to the river or up on the hill, I carry God in my arms. I hold him, and find he is holding me.”

*...I hold him, and he is holding me...*

And then he turns to his neighbours and says:

“Here – you hold him for a moment.”

This is how the piece ends.

And its beauty and simplicity struck me!

However high or low the places in which we live are... whatever our fields of Bethlehem look like,...

if we could just all walk out of this place tonight carrying God in our arms...

if we could carry on with our lives from this point on, holding God, and by doing so being able to feel that he is holding us...

Wouldn't that be great?!

This tonight  
is the meeting place  
of heaven and earth.  
This tonight  
is the stable  
in which God keeps his  
appointment  
to meet his people...

...here, you hold him!