

Advent Meditations Part 3

The Shepherds

Luke 2:8-20

Now in that same 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 Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

It is only Luke who tells us of his encounter between the Angel and the shepherds. The Angel is not imparting such important news to a King, or a Governor, or a High Priest. Just as Jesus will do some thirty years or so into the future, ordinary folk of lowly status are chosen.

The shepherds will have lived out on the hillsides, looking after the flocks. Unlike the shepherds often depicted in Nativity plays, men with beards, the shepherds will have been men, boys and some women.

Shepherds were very low in the social pecking order of the time. They would have received no formal education, and certainly most of them would have been illiterate. Yet they were chosen by God to receive the wonderful news of the arrival of our Saviour.



I have liked this picture of the Angel and the shepherds for many years. We see seven shepherds all reacting to the sudden appearance of the Angel in different ways.

On the left of the picture are three figures, one is half turned towards the Angel, perhaps too frightened to fully turn.

The next figure has hands clasped in prayer, eyes cast downward, maybe recognizing the holiness of this moment, but still too afraid to fully engage.

The third figure is face to the floor too frightened to look upon the Angel.

In the centre, next to the Angel is a shepherd who appears to be dazzled and swooning, overcome by the moment.

On the extreme right is a figure, hands clasped in prayer, and looking at the Angel.

One shepherd is half risen, holding back the side of the tent, looking directly towards the Angel.

In between these last two figures is another shepherd, face masked by shadow as he hides from the Angel.

In the meditation I would like you to study the picture and imagine yourself there. How do you react to this sudden encounter with a shining messenger of God? Perhaps imagine it happens to you today. What would your reaction be? Which one of the shepherds would you be?

Would you be rising to engage with the Angel, to receive the amazing news? Would you be prayerful yet afraid to look up? Would you faint with the shock of it? Or would you hide and try to pretend it wasn't happening?

Be honest with yourself as you imagine the scene. Which shepherd you are may change as you meditate further. Just go with that.

The shepherds received the news and decided to do something with it. I like to imagine it was the shepherd holding back the tent who fully engaged and said to the others, 'Let's go and see this miracle'.

And so they did, and told Mary about all they had seen and heard. After that they went away praising God and telling of all that had happened.

How are you going to share the wonderful news of the birth of Jesus Christ, and the coming of the wonderful light into the world?