

Sermon 31/12/23 Luke 2:15-21

Why do the shepherds matter to us?

So that's it then. Christmas is over. Finished. We can move on to planning Lent and Easter.

Christmas Day and Boxing Day are behind us and we are wading out of the messiness. The screwed up wrapping paper is in the recycling bin, we have decided which chocolate to eat ourselves and which to donate as raffle prizes, and those 'only used at Christmas' plates are back in the dark corner of the cupboard. On that note I should just comment on the remarkable transformation of the St James church building following the Shepherds@thecrib on Christmas Eve from a building strewn with bits of cotton wool and some mince pie accidents, to a clean, tidy, everything in its place sort of a church in a very short time. Amazing.

So the physical messiness may be over but let's not forget that we are still very much in the middle of Christmas. In the middle of the story.

Shepherds. They don't get a very good press do they? When it comes to casting nativities both children and adults prefer the more glamorous angel and Wise Men roles – it's the costumes. Who wants to wear a tea towel and a brown sack when they could be dressed in white or satin? And they get a bit lost in the middle of the story between the angel trumpets and the camel hooves.

Shepherds. I was going to say they are easy to identify with but that could elicit howls of protest and a great deal of offence. So try it this way. The shepherds were ordinary people going about their ordinary lives when something amazing happened. Most of us would describe ourselves as ordinary people going about our ordinary lives with no expectation that something amazing would happen.

Luke's telling of the nativity story is so economical that he squeezes all the important bits into a very small space, and leaves us to fill in some of the gaps. It is obvious that there is more he could have said but he doesn't. We don't know why. But it does allow us to put our own spin on the bits in between.

The shepherds were visited by the angels. They could have been so transfixed by the angels' visit that in an almost trance like state they followed the angelic instructions into the town and found the family perhaps with halos as in the style of an Italian masterpiece. Or maybe in their sleepy state they were unsure what they really had seen and so they debated whether or not to go. There were the sheep to consider, the fire, old Reuben's rheumatism, would they actually be welcome? They did decide to go. The shepherd's visited the baby and became the first to worship.

It is generally agreed that Luke would at some point have had an opportunity to speak to Mary and ask her what she remembered about that extraordinary night. She will have told him of the anxiety when they had nowhere to go, and of their unexpected visitors. She reflected on these things.

And what did the shepherds do? They went about telling everyone. Mary may have told Luke that but the words, 'all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them'. That implies that Luke heard this from another source, maybe just common talk in the streets. The shepherds told everyone about their extraordinary experience. The shepherds, who had no fancy theological training, they didn't protest that they weren't teachers, told everyone what they had seen and heard. And became the first evangelists.

In the 10.30 service here at St James we sometimes stop for a few moments to allow people to share anything in their week where God has seemed to be particularly influential. We call them the 'wow' moments. Some of the things that people share are big and pivotal moments in their lives or those of

their families and friends. One morning someone stood up and reminded us that they can be small things too – she was saying ‘Wow and thank you’ to God for waking up each morning with less pain in her body than there had been.

Now those shepherds were having a wow moment a dramatic encounter. But the drama was around their meeting with the angels, God’s messengers, the strange light in the sky, the people who came out of the light. Their encounter with God was much more low key, in a space set aside for animals, God himself in human form only a few hours old, mother and baby doing okay, but well exhausted. That didn’t stop the shepherds, he may have only been a baby, but he was where the angel said he would be, he was their hope for the future. They wanted to tell everyone.

And we can also tell everyone. Already families bring friends to Jimmy Tots and Messy Church, older people bring friends to the Welcome café and the Sunday lunches. ‘Come and see’ is the message. ‘It is good for me, it could be good for you.’ Let’s encourage them to join in with other of the things that we do.

It may feel as though we are at the end of Christmas but that is only the beginning of the Jesus story, a story that we are still in the middle of. A story whose telling was begun by those shepherds 2000 years ago, and has been told by many others in the intervening years. Importantly a story told by and told for ordinary people leading ordinary lives who one day may discover something amazing – many of us already have.