

I have always felt a bit sorry for the shepherds in the Christmas story.

There they are, out on the cold hillside watching their sheep, whilst sitting on the cold ground. Is that where the expression “counting sheep” comes from, I wonder? Do they get the right number or does it change as the night goes on and they keep on counting? Anyway, there they are, doing their job as they have done for days, months and years before. It does seem one that could get a little tedious.

They must have welcomed an interruption. I don’t suppose they were expecting an angel to appear! Let alone glory shining “all around,” though. In Luke’s gospel it says that they were terrified. I imagine that does not begin to describe how they were feeling. The words of the angel, “Do not be afraid,” seems something of an understatement in the circumstances. Yet the angel continued, “I bring you good tidings of great joy.” Perhaps not what they were expecting.

Yet the angel continued, “Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you: he is Christ the Lord.”

I imagine they were not familiar with angels, let alone words like Saviour; or Christ the Lord. Yet the angel continued, “This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly here was a word they knew and understood. A ‘manger’, they know what that was, they were, after all, used to dealing with sheep and, probably, cattle or goats. It did seem a bit peculiar that this Saviour was lying in a ‘manger’ but perhaps they should go and check it out. Yet, immediately things got even more peculiar. Now a great company of the heavenly host, lots more angels, appeared, all praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests. “ Then the angels disappeared, as quickly as they had arrived.” I imagine there was a long moment of shocked surprise. Then the shepherds said, “Let’s check this out, or words to that effect.” They

also recognised where this message had originated, “Let us see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” They didn’t doubt for a minute what they had just witnessed.

When they reached Bethlehem they found it just as the angels had said. There was the baby in a manger and they were so excited that they spread the word to everyone they met. They couldn’t keep it to themselves. And everyone was amazed when they explained what they had seen.

The shepherds hadn’t waited to check out what they had seen but went straight to Bethlehem. It was their encounter with the baby and not their meeting with the angels that was the good news they wanted to share. A tiny baby, new-born and vulnerable and yet everyone was amazed. The shepherds might have been expected to talk about their meeting with angels: an unusual occurrence in itself, but instead, it was this tiny, helpless baby, new-born and vulnerable that was the good news.

And Mary said nothing. But, we read that Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

Meanwhile, the shepherds returned to their flocks, as we are told, “glorifying and praising God” for all the things they had heard and seen.”

And everything returned to normal.

We don’t read anything more about the shepherds. But we do continue to read of the Good News that has arrived; so that we too can sing, as the shining throng of angels sang, “All glory be to God on high, and to the earth, be peace; good will hence forth from heav’n to men, begin and never cease.”

Amen