

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter Morning Prayer 10.30am online

24th April 2021

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Lord, may the meditations of my heart, and my words be acceptable in your sight, and set our hearts on fire with love for you. Amen.

One word describes the night that Jesus was born - and that is 'ordinary'. It was an ordinary night, there was a light breeze, and a chill in the air. The sky was dark, the stars twinkled, and clouds skated past the moon... The sort of night when.... it is quite tempting to wrap up warm, sit outside, and just enjoy looking upwards, appreciating the lack of light pollution, and the lack of traffic noise.

The sort of night... when you might see a meteor or two... depending on the time of year. You might even be sitting out socially distanced, with a friend or with your family, wrapped up warm against the cold.... you might even have your dog at your side... curled up against you, snuggling affectionately...

Some years ago, I was in Israel: it was evening, the sun was going down... and the temperature was dropping - and coming across the wilderness, in the distance, I could hear tinkling...

Moments later, a bundle of sheep tottered into sight, huddled together - their bodies all pointing forwards, and their heads facing all sorts of directions, as they bleated... and swayed about as if in half-matted together in a woolly mass.

A moment after that... a young man appeared, with his crook. He was wrapped up in old clothes, tanned and lean, from living rough on the hillsides. He carried just a few things with him: a bag over his shoulder and what looked like a mat to sleep upon. It was one of those moments when time felt almost irrelevant - as if it could have occurred on any one night over many thousands of years.

Perhaps that's why God in his great wisdom, did not choose to be born in some amazing palace, surrounded by highly sophisticated people of great power, who would have operated like a closed society. Two thousand years ago - and earlier, as we can read in the old Testament- powerful people had the

resources and incentives to manage the media, influence public opinion and spin fake news. King Herod was a timely example - intentionally misleading the wise men into thinking he did not have a problem with the child born to be King. Oh yes, he did!

Instead, God through his angels spoke to ordinary people, doing an ordinary job, in an ordinary context. The people who were on the receiving end of God's truly great news, were people who could be relied upon to go and 'tell it as it is' - people without sophisticated educations, technology, or training in media studies. That is quite comforting: it indicates that we can do this: with all the advantages we have, we can do it well.

So where did the sheep come into the story? The sheep were ordinary. Paraphrasing the saying 'A dog is not just for Christmas, it's for life', one could say 'Sheep are not just cute little lambs for Easter, they are livestock, the responsibility of human beings from season to season. And a lot of the time they're not cute.' Some of them would have been fat, some scrawny, some with barrel bellies, and skinny legs. They were simply sheep: a reminder that the world we live in is based on inter-dependency, relationships: ordinary people doing ordinary daily activities, according to God's plan within the world created for us. That is where God meets us: in the ordinary stuff of life.

God loves ordinary people – doing ordinary things. The shepherds did not ask God to send hosts of angels: that was God's initiative. The shepherds did not ask God if he was sure he knew what he was doing? If the angels had gone instead to the Pharisees— just imagine the think-tanks, committees and interim statements that would have been called progress reports.

God did not go to the politicians, who might have looked around to see who was watching and secretly recording. And he did not go to the most powerful and influential people at the time, who probably would have consulted their diaries and told him not to contact them: they would get their exec PA to contact him.

God sent his angel to the shepherds: country folk, ordinary people without high reputations to micromanage, axes real or virtual to grind, or career ladders to climb. God worked through them, where they were, being the people they were intended to be, in God's plan.

So, three simple observations for you this morning, about how God longs to work in - and through - you.

First, the shepherds had a conversation, and decided to journey together. They said, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place'. They did not dither or set up a committee: they got on with it. They took responsibility and made a collaborative decision, so they could obey the God-given instruction, and set out in the wilderness, made the trek across the wilderness to the little town of Bethlehem - and kept searching till they found the holy family.

From a shepherd's perspective, that was a big request, because it meant the shepherds were leaving their livelihood and animals and trusting that the calling from God was genuine. They may have been uneducated, unsophisticated, and under-resourced, but they did not lack in spiritual discernment. They made their investment, in real time, with real assets, putting God first.

However ordinary the shepherds may have been regarded before the great angelic revelation, they are and always will be - excellent role models of discipleship. Some big questions arise, such as: how committed are we, to searching and finding Jesus? What are we prepared to leave behind? And when we find him, what are we going to do?

The second observation - is that the shepherds knew exactly what to do: they worked collaboratively again and shared the news of Jesus. As Luke records: "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." (Luke 2:17-18)".

It is easy to assume that all who heard, were amazed by the story of the angels appearing, the heavenly praise, and the glory shining all around, rather than finding a young unmarried couple, in a stable, with a new-born baby in a manger.

The shepherds, having no fixed abode, would have been unable to testify in court to assert their 'truth'. But having no fixed abode, is not a measure of authenticity, integrity, truthfulness. What mattered, what made their witness so powerful, was that they spoke from their hearts, and their message connected with the deepest needs of the people who heard the message.

The shepherds had not done a course in evangelism or adjusted their zoom background: they simply told it, as it is. And their news was so wonderful, powerful, and true: so credible, it has stood the test of time.

When we speak from our own deep experience of faith, hope, and love through being in Christ and Christ in us, when we talk about our relationship with Jesus, that is when we are most credible. When we speak from our hearts, our message reaches the hearts of those... with whom we are sharing this good news. When we are so energised, we cannot keep the good news inside us: we have to share it, and the more we share it, the easier it becomes to share.

And the third observation - is that the shepherds praised God for the things that they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told (Luke 2.20). Praising God and sharing the news about Jesus go hand in hand. As our faith grows and deepens, the more we realise what God has done for us, through Jesus, the more we want to praise God, giving him all the glory, and our thanks.

If we feel shy, perhaps we should ask ourselves: what would we do, if we were sitting outside in the garden one evening, watching the stars, and the heavens opened, and we had a visitation from angels sing about God's glory? Would we be embarrassed? Self-conscious? Insecure? Why?!

Listen to St Paul: we are all children of God, and because we are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!' (Galatians 4:6). We were brought into being to worship and to praise God. We are Christians: this is what we are meant to do.

You may wonder why we consider the shepherds today – when they were doing Christmas Night and we are doing the morning of the fourth Sunday of Easter. There are connections. The shepherds were given meaning – the angels came from God to them. They knew then, that however ordinary they felt, they mattered to God. They had been given hope – because they knew then that God had sent them Jesus, to be their Saviour and Lord. And they knew the joy of being part of God's great eternal plan for humankind.

So, from now on, as you go about your days... and sit out in the garden in the evenings... be prepared to be surprised by God, be prepared to be called by God to respond, and be prepared to be filled with joy to overflowing, called to sing his praises, in this world – and for evermore. Amen.