

LUKE 2.8-20: SHEPHERDS AT CHRISTMAS

[Chelmsford Christmas Day 2012]

As turkey and Christmas pudding belong together, so too do the shepherds and the baby Jesus.

Christmas without “*shepherds abiding in their fields*” would be unthinkable.

Who would dare produce a nativity play and fail to let the shepherds not have a part?

Indeed, one of my proudest moments as a child was when I played the part of a shepherd, wearing a tea-towel around my head!

At this point let me introduce my Christmas joke: ‘*What did the sheep say to the shepherd?*’
‘*Season’s bleatings!*’

To be serious, let us look at the shepherds.

Luke the historian tells us: “**There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks**” (Luke 2.8).

We’ve heard these words so often - but I wonder have you realised that this verse shows that Jesus was not born on December 25?

For sheep were not kept out in the fields in the depth of winter.

Sheep were kept out in the fields only between March and November – otherwise it was too cold.

The fact is that nobody knows when Jesus was born.

Interestingly around 200 AD there were two theories about the date: one was that Jesus was born on May 20, the other was that he was born on either April 20 or 21.

Almost certainly 25 December was chosen because it was the day of a well-known pagan festival celebrating the annual return of the sun: the church replaced the pagan festival with a Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus on the grounds that it is easier to take away an unholy festival from the population when you can replace it with an even better festival

But to return to Luke 2.8: according to the GNB the shepherds “**were spending the night in the fields**”: literally, they were “*watching the watches of the night*”, i.e. they were taking turns watching over their flock by night.

So, there they were, three or four shepherds at the most, “**spending the night in the fields**”.

Does this therefore mean that Jesus was born at night? Yes, say some.

Indeed, on the basis of a verse in the inter-testamental book of the Wisdom of Solomon, some argue that Jesus was born on the stroke of midnight. For there we read: “*When all things were in quiet silence, and the night in its swift course was half spent, your all-powerful word leaped down from heaven’s royal throne*” (Wisd.Sol 18.14-15).

I am not convinced. Frankly we don’t really know the time when Jesus was born, just as we do not know the day of his birth.

But what we do know, is that the first people to receive the news of the birth of a Saviour were a group of **shepherds**. And that is significant.

For in those days shepherds were not just ordinary working-class people – they were a bunch of rascals and rogues, who defied all conventions of decency and respectability.

In fact they were called “*people of the dirt*” - ‘*scum-bags*’ if you like.

No self-respecting Jewish parent would want their daughter to marry a shepherd.

According to one Jewish rabbi: ‘*You will find that there is no more contemptible occupation in the world than that of shepherds*’.

Shepherds had as much standing in the Jewish community as tax-collectors.

Furthermore, they were not religious people

Thanks to their need to be on duty 24-7, few if any of them went to church or synagogue once a week – it was more like once in a blue moon.

Living out in the fields, they were unable to keep the Jewish ceremonial law - not for them the observance of ritual hand-washings and all the other rules & regulations practised by devout Jews. No, they were rough-and-ready chaps.

But it wasn't only the ceremonial law which they failed to observe.

By and large they failed too to keep the moral law.

Most of them were thoroughly dishonest – apparently unable to distinguish between right and wrong.

Like some of today's 'travellers', they had an unfortunate habit of confusing 'mine' with 'thine'.

Things went missing when the shepherds went to town.

And when they were out of town, they often allowed their flocks to graze upon other people's land.

As a result of this reputation no shepherd was allowed to play a part in a court of law - no shepherd could be called to act as a witness - they just couldn't be trusted!

They were the Arthur Dalys of this world!

And yet it was to shepherds that God sent the angelic choir

It was to shepherds that God made known that a Saviour was born in David's city.

It was the shepherds, and not the wise men, who were the first to receive the news.

What does this say to us? Surely this: Jesus is good news for everybody, whoever we are, whatever we have done! Listen again to the words of the angel: **“I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to ALL the people. This very day to David's town your Saviour was born - Christ the Lord”**

Churches today may be largely the preserve of the middle-classes, but Jesus is most certainly not just the Saviour of the respectable middle-class. Jesus is the Saviour of the world.

Yes, Jesus is good news not just for church-goers, but for non-church-goers.

What's more, Jesus is good news for people who for one reason or another have failed to live up to God's standards.

As Jesus said on more than one occasion: **“I have not come to call respectable people to repent, but sinners”** (Lk 5.32)

It is this which we celebrate today

It doesn't matter who we are or what we have done, God accepts us as we are.

We don't have to reach a certain standard of holiness before God loves us, he loves us as we are.

We do not have to prove ourselves

The message of Christmas is that there is nobody outside the scope of the love of God.

And to prove it, God sent the message of his Son's birth to a bunch of free-wheeling shepherds spending the night in the fields, taking care of their sheep.

But love needs a response. The shepherds responded first by going to Bethlehem to look into the matter, and then, on finding Jesus, by praising God for all that they had heard and seen.

Let me this morning encourage you likewise to go to Bethlehem and look into the matter – to face up to the wonder of God's love for Jesus. And then to return to your homes and places of work, praising God for all you have heard and seen.