

CHRISTMAS SERMON 2013 Luke 2:1-20

On a chill night above Bethlehem, a little town once the birthplace of a shepherd-become-king David, rough-hewn sheep minders were drowsing, puffing a final pipe, sipping a skin of wine, warmed by the campfire embers, preparing to slip into their bed roll. As 24/7 shepherds, they were wrapped up in their sheep. Through life experience in the school of hard knocks, they had settled for few other earthly rewards than their beloved sheep. Ceremonially unclean, they were disfellowed from synagogue and alone.

Suddenly, God threw a switch to display heavenly Christmas lights like none other. With a mighty hubbub from heaven, the black curtain of night split open to reveal scores of rainbow-bright and utterly terrifying angels, who pierced the stillness with mellifluous singing as they danced around the stars with the ease of darting fireflies. They gave the greatest news the world had ever heard. When the angels went back into heaven, one shepherd urged "Let us trust our bedded-down sheep to God. Let us go to Bethlehem to see the Lamb of God. Let us kneel before him, for he comes to bring God's promised salvation."

Nine months before this display, a mere slip of a girl owned, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word." Now very pregnant, Mary faced an eighty-mile trudge, because, from distant Rome, an unfeeling Emperor (read my lips: "pay more tax") Augustus, decreed that she follow her husband Joseph to his ancestral hometown for a tax count. Their stumbling journey was so slow, that the pair arrived in Bethlehem long after everyone else. At the home of Joseph's kin, there was no hot meal, no warm bath, no comfy bed, no vacancy sign. The whole clan of King David's line, upstairs, had not had such a carousing reunion in years. They had no time to squeeze in a visit downstairs, not for a mere carpenter's woman with child, even if Joe was kin to many. Downstairs was the filthy stable, in which one gagged at the foetid droppings of animals penned quite some time now against the wintry cold.

Over these nine months past, Mary's teenage mind had been convulsed with the flurry of implications of her having said "Yes" to God. Earlier, her spunky monkey, Joe, could have broken off the engagement and asked for the ring back. She knew that she had come within an inch of being stoned for immorality. If not brutally killed, she and her child would have been shunted into the laneways as an impoverished street beggar. But God made it that Joe came good.

Now, once again, the brow of the poor lass is deeply furrowed, as she cried, "God, where are you in this stable stench? You gave me this child. Can't you postpone delivery till we can find a more hygienic place for baby? Angel Gabriel did not mention any of this. It's not the way I dreamed of having our child. There's no doctor, no mid-wife, no epidural. If my baby is to be the Son of the Most High God, what's he doing being born in a barn, God?"

The child was born on the stable straw. He was tucked up into the donkey dribble and ox saliva in a wretched feed trough, no soft mattress, no footie

colour pillow, no one taking his tiny finger and beaming “Ain’t ‘e a little Tiger!. Look at his grip.” Thoroughly spent, Mary desperately needed cheering good news. And, that’s why in dashed the mangy, sheep-smelling shepherds, to announce, through scraggly teeth, an incredible tale, that, after centuries of silence, God had spoken a mind-blowing message, a world-changing message, that the Lamb of God, the long-awaited saving Messiah to be, had been born. Mary knew that only cousin Elizabeth and Joseph had known that she was carrying the Light come into this world. Now, the grimy shepherds made known what had been told them about the child, and the secret was out to the world. Lying on her palliase, completely done in by all the divergent disconnections and contradictions and the birth, Mary dropped the lot deep into the hopper of her subconscious and sank back comforted by her utter acceptance of how her good God was working all things together to the good.

The shepherds went out and “glorified God for all they had seen and heard.” (Luk2 2:20) Openly, publicly, they spoke the Good News of Jesus come to all. This was itself a miracle. These shunned social outcasts, who registered at one level above lepers, were not the coolest guys on the block. They were mistrusted as dishonest from their vagrant, nomadic life-style. Yet, here they were, the first evangelists, who, having seen the Babe of Bethlehem, could not keep silent about him, even if they tried. We can now sing “Joy to the World,” because of what those shepherds did with the gift God gave them, and, their spirits were changed from eternal put-down to utter joy. They were transformed from humiliation to Hallelujah. Announcing the greatest event in all history, the heavenly host did not appear to King Herod, nor to the mayor of Bethlehem; even the High Priests were left out of the loop. The noble news of Christ come was given by the Good Shepherd to lowly sheep herders. Intentionally, God used those normally scorned as God’s messengers of Good News. The so-called ‘right’ people in boardrooms, in counting houses, at Club Med, were the ‘wrong’ ones. The newborn Prince of Peace came into a world of jagged, hurtful cruelty, of gentle, sobbing sadness, much of it human made, a world where violence will not take a holiday. The newborn Prince of Peace came to show that true peace comes through Mandela-like humility, speedy reconciliation, and loving kindly service. Jesus’ coming took some time to change the world. A successor Emperor to Augustus called *Nero* horribly executed early Christians, particularly Peter and Paul. But the day came when folk named their sons after Peter and Paul and named their dogs after Nero. The newborn Prince of Peace came to show us how to esteem and embrace the unloved; he came to show us how to give value to the disregarded; he came to show us how to raise up the lowly put down. He came and he comes to lavish attention on us, the ordinary, unfulfilled, unsuccessful, insignificant, sometimes unpopular us. The Good News he brings is a joy for all people. May we keep his notion of a true Christmas in our hearts so we may be kept in its hope. Amen.

Walter McEntee