

Dear Friends,

Luke 2: 8-12

When do you think God is most likely to come to you? When you are in church being religious? When you are at your best, being good? Or how about when you are going about your everyday life, just being you? That's how it was for the shepherds. They were doing what shepherds do. They were keeping watch over their flocks. Sheep were usually kept outside between April and November. If there was an appropriate place, they might also be kept out in the winter. At night, their shepherds would take it in turns to watch over them to protect them from thieves and wild animals.

A number of great people from the past had been shepherds, including Moses and David. God was also seen as being like a shepherd. There were however many who looked down on them. They were often poor and came from amongst the people who had not been given much education. Their work made it impossible for them to keep all the demands of their religion. This was not their fault. They were just doing what had to be done. But the respectable people looked down on them for it. It was however, to these ordinary, put upon, people that God chose to announce the news that Jesus had been born.

An angel of the Lord appears to them. We are not given the name of the angel. Perhaps, once again it is Gabriel. The glory of the Lord shines around the angel. Through this angel the presence of God is coming to the shepherds. In response the shepherds feel great fear. We are beginning to recognise the pattern and wonder if we can anticipate how the angel will respond to the fear of the shepherds. As expected, the angel says, "Do not be afraid". The angel goes on, "I am bringing you good news of great joy". God wants to take away the great fear of the shepherds and give them instead great joy. This good news is "for all the people". As we've heard, "all the people", at this stage, probably means Israel, although the understanding of those for whom God comes will expand and grow as Luke takes us through the story of Jesus and his followers.

While the good news the angel is giving is general, that is, it's for all the people, it is also particular, that is, it's for each individual shepherd and it's for you. The angel emphasises this by saying "to you" three times. In the Greek in which Luke is writing the first "to you" is placed between "good news" and "great joy". Luke puts the words in this order, "I give good news to you a joy great". The feel is of little you being surrounded and enfolded by good news and great joy. He goes on to say that a child "was born to you today". This is happening "today", God is acting now, in the present moment. It's not a vague promise for the future, or something that only exists in another dimension or future life, it is happening here and now, in our history. Then the third "to you" is the sign they are given that the child will be wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.

We are given three titles for the child who has been born. He is "Saviour". That's a word that is often used for God, although it was also used for those who came to

help and save Israel when she was in need. He is "Christ". That is God's chosen one. He is "the Lord". That can just be a respectful term like "Sir", but it can also be used to refer to God. In this story, it's already been used twice to refer to God in "the angel of the Lord", and "the glory of the Lord".

This child, in whom God is coming to the people will be found "wrapped in strips of cloth". That was normal. That was done to ensure that the baby's limbs would grow straight. He will also be "lying in a manger". That also was normal as we've already heard.

Here is the choice that God makes. God comes to ordinary, put upon people like the shepherds. God comes in the humble circumstances in which ordinary, often poor people, lived out their lives. Could this be God's way of making sure that each and every person knows that this good news of great joy really is "to you ... to you ... to you"?

God bless you,

Tony