

Reflection Wednesday 23rd December

Reading Luke 2:8-20

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 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. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

The scene is set in the school hall and children are there gathered around a doll with plenty of tea towels and dressing gowns. We have all been in, or watched, a Nativity story. There has developed over the years a style of play that has certain parts to it that if left out would be missed but which have no origin in the Biblical story.

There is no mention of an innkeeper saying "no room"; the wise men and the shepherds would not have met in the stable around a manger but we watch the play year by year and in it there is comfort.

The shepherds are of course a key part who do get a mention in the Biblical text but do not necessarily bring a lamb as a gift. I'm not sure what Mary and Joseph would do with a lamb journeying to Jerusalem for the presentation in the Temple or going into exile in Egypt.

But let me wander a little in my thinking. The word translated "inn" can mean guestroom and the stable could be the place where the animals were kept.

Could it be that since Joseph's family line was from Bethlehem he had relatives there still? Could it be that he went to visit family but the house was full, the guest room taken by other family members who had done the same visit for the census? Mary and Joseph made best use of the warmth of the animal shelter that could have been part of the house? Then of course there would have been a place for the lamb to stay as well.

These were not ordinary shepherds. These shepherds looked after the lambs that were to be offered as sacrifices in the Temple, lambs without blemish who were swaddled for their own protection. It was such shepherds who came to visit the one who spoke of himself as the Great Shepherd of the sheep, whilst being referred to elsewhere as the Lamb of God. He was to be without blemish and ultimately was offered in sacrifice as a sin offering for all. "You will find a baby wrapped in cloths, (swaddled) and lying in a manger."

This is our God showing forth the story of a baby's life even before it had fully begun.