

Luke 2:15-20 – faith sees invisible realities

Due to the peculiarities of the Anglican lectionary, I have been given the second half of the well-known Christmas story of the Shepherds. The first half of this story [Luke 2:1-14], was assigned to Christmas Day. In the first half, we read how angels appeared to startled shepherds as they were watching over their sheep in the countryside near Bethlehem. The angels told the shepherds about a baby who had been born that night in Bethlehem, the town famous as the birthplace of King David, Israel's greatest king.

This is where we pick up the story in today's lectionary reading; "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.'" And so they did, they rushed off to Bethlehem and, presumably after a bit of searching, they "found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger."

Now I want you to put yourselves in the shoes of these shepherds. They had left the sheep for which they were responsible to the mercy of the dark hills – perhaps leaving one of two of the young shepherd boys to watch over them. They had rushed with some urgency to the town of Bethlehem and, after their anxious searching, here was a mother with her new-born baby and her husband watching over them. Admittedly it was unusual to find a manger or feeding trough being used for the baby's cot, but probably not remarkable on a night such as this when the town was filled with crowds of families and children who had come to Bethlehem for the Roman census. So I want to ask this question, "*What did these shepherds see?*"

"What did the shepherds see?" There was nothing visible to distinguish this little family from any other – there were no halos around the head of mother or baby such as we see on our Christmas cards. There was no ox or ass bowing down at the manger – if such animals had been there they would probably have been frustrated that their feeding trough was no longer available for their use! There was nothing unusual to be seen in this baby. The popular carol *Away in a manger...* states that, "the little Lord Jesus, no crying he made"; but I would suggest that a more accurate portrayal is that of the Christmas hymn written by Mrs Alexander for her Sunday School children, *Once in royal David's city*, which declares;

he was little, weak and helpless,
tears and smiles like us he knew.

What then did these rough shepherds see? They clearly saw something extraordinary in this child for we read, "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child." They had seen something that they simply had to tell the world about. And as they told others we read, "all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."

What then did the shepherds see? And what did the shepherds tell all who would listen to them?

Well, perhaps I have been misleading you for the emphasis of this passage is not just on what the shepherds *saw* but also on what they had been told. The shepherds had seen angels, heavenly messengers, who had told them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Once they had got over their astonishment and had taken in what was said to them they said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and

see this thing that has happened, *which the Lord has told us about.*" What they saw was shaped by what they had heard; it was shaped by what had been told them by the Lord. They saw a new-born baby in a manger with its mother and her husband watching over him. This is what the angel had told them about. But there was more, through his angel the Lord had told them that this child is the long promised Messiah, the Lord of glory and Saviour of the world. This is what they saw. What they saw was shaped by what the Lord had revealed to them. And this was the message they told to all who would hear them, "We bring you good news of great joy. Today in Bethlehem a child has been born who will be our Saviour; he is the Messiah, the Lord." For they, "spread the word concerning *what had been told them about this child.*"

What have you seen in this child born so long ago? Is it a sentimental story fit for a children's nativity play and the decoration of Christmas cards? What do you see here?

Has the Spirit of God opened your eyes to see in this child lying in a manger one who is the Lord of glory? Then, we, like the dear impetuous apostle Peter can say, "We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." We have seen beyond the babe in a manger to the wonder of God's Son, our Saviour sent from heaven to live among us as Immanuel and to bring us back to God. The Spirit enables us, by faith, to see him who is invisible (Hebrews 11:27). What we see is shaped by what we have been told by God himself – it is shaped by our faith, our trust in God's word.

What do you see in Jesus?

And what do you see when you look at the world around you today? I am sure that you see a world torn apart by disease, power struggles, the inequalities that inflate the wealth of some while impoverishing and enslaving others, you see the greed that ravages our planet for temporary advantage at the expense of our children and grandchildren. There is much that is evil in our world, that is all too visible and evident. How do you view the year ahead with all its uncertainties?

If you have been following the readings and notes in our *Passage For The Day*, you will have been reading the Book of Revelation this month. It's a book full of extraordinary images but it's also a book with a simple message. John, the author of the book is enabled to see beyond the troubling conflicts of his own day and to gain a glimpse into the courts of heaven. There he sees that Jesus, the Lamb who had been slain, is risen from the dead and is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, before whom every knee shall bow. He is the one who reigns over all creation and is working out the purposes of the living God until "the kingdom of the world [shall] become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15).

John was given this vision for the churches; it was given for us. Are you able to see beyond the confusion and chaos of this present world to the reality that this Jesus, born so long ago at Bethlehem, is Christ the Lord and that he is establishing his kingdom of righteousness, joy and peace, a kingdom that will never be shaken? The Spirit enables us to say with the author of the book of Hebrews, "At present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus ... crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." (Hebrews 2:8-9).

What do you see? What do you see in this child in a manger? What do you see that gives hope for this world? Have you heard for yourself what the Lord has said?

And if you have seen in this child a Saviour who suffered death for us and is now crowned with glory and honour, if you have seen the one who is at the heart of the purposes of God for all creation, what are you going to tell others of what you have seen and heard? The shepherds not only told others of this wonderful child, they also "returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.

May we tell others of what we have seen and heard that they may join us in glorifying and praising our God for all that he has done – glorifying and praising him with our voices but also with our entire lives.

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