

St Peter's Ealing
Christmas Day 2020

The angle of the Lord stood before them...and they were terrified. Luke 2.9

One of the many effects of COVID has been the restriction on singing in church. Through much of the year we have coped with that and got on with life. But at Christmas the poignancy of this moratorium is heightened. We love singing a carol or two and many come to church at Christmas to do just that. When I met people in the park whilst walking my dogs the first question would be, "Are you keeping Christmas?". When I had reassured them we were at St Peter's I then reminded them we cannot sing in church. "What? No carols? At Christmas; are you serious?" and slightly crest fallen they continued their walk.

One of the carols I have missed singing this year is 'While shepherds watched'. Putting aside the school boy silliness of imagining them washing their socks by night, this is the song of those hard-working people who lived on a hillside, scraping together a living, who are visited by a bunch of angles.

Nahum Tate, the Irish born poet laureate of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, caught the essence of the bible passage on which the carol is based. There is a phrase within the carol that rather stuck with me whilst preparing this sermon. In the second verse: 'Fear not,' said he (for mighty dread had seized their troubled mind). We have a view of these humble shepherds trembling on a hillside before the mighty phalanx of the angelic host. Yet, I am more curious by the 'trouble minds' the shepherds already had, that was seized by mighty dread.

We all carry troubles with us. There are always issues in our lives playing on our minds. This year perhaps more than most and maybe even this Christmas as we cope with extra restrictions and the inability to spend time with the family and friends we had been hoping to see all year. Having a troubled mind is part of the human condition, part of who we are. By caring for others, engaging in the community and sharing in the world and even striving to survive, troubles come upon us in many shapes and forms. So too for our shepherds, ordinary people living ordinary lives in the occupied nation just trying to keep body and soul together.

Here then are these ordinary, hardworking shepherds, on a hillside making a living. No different from you or me. Then a message from God comes to them. They are frightened (mighty dread had seized them) because something had happened around them completely out of their experience. I guess we would react the same. To be honest I am a little surprised they didn't just leg it. Instead, having heard the message from the divine messengers the shepherds sought out, in the town of Bethlehem, the infant proclaimed. In finding the infant and the words of the angels being confirmed the shepherds realised something important. In visiting the child and sharing their story the shepherds received something new into their troubled lives...hope born of God's love for all people revealed in the birth of this child. Their troubled lives became less troubled. Not because the troubles of life went away, but because they understood a new balance, a new reality where God becomes the centre of their being and God's love gives strength. They could return to their work praising God because they now understood that in their troubled life they were no longer alone. God had come down to be amongst people, the cosmos had been made complete in this infant, "The word was made flesh and lived among us" as the Gospel of St John tells us.

At this point in the story we should stop and take a breath. We maybe tempted to move on in the Christmas story and look towards the coming of the Magi. Instead, stop; breath. Ask yourself: How is this story for me? How is it my story? There are no angelic choirs for us. We don't find ourselves on a hillside. But this is our story. We have our own troublous life; our own cares and concerns amid life's busy-ness. How do we hear of the good news of great joy? This story, these shepherds are us, they are for us. Through them we begin to hear the story of our own salvation. With them we come to the crib side and look into the face of the Christ child. With them we receive Jesus into our own hearts too. We can receive the hope of God given in him; we can know God's love for us in this child. Because it is unto us a child is born, it is unto us a son is given and he is called Mighty Counsellor and Prince of Peace.