

What time did you get up this morning? Probably some of you are already thinking that the day got off to rather too early a start. You're thinking other things too. It can be difficult to concentrate properly in church at the best of times, and Christmas Day is probably the most difficult time of all. I suspect there are quite a few 'non-holy' thoughts floating around at the moment. Everything from 'Have I put everything in the car so we can go straight off to Grandma's?' or 'I wonder what's in that big box I saw under the tree', to 'Is mum really going to make me eat sprouts?' and 'Please can we get through the day without Dad and Auntie Em having another argument'. You might even be hoping that I don't go on for too long up here, because you've got to get the turkey on.

All this is quite understandable – and I'll try not to go on for too long. When I was young the big Christmas day worry was whether the gas pressure would hold up so that everything got properly cooked. My mother would get up extra early to light the oven and put the bird in, just in case. And while you were getting up this morning, quite a lot of other people were going to work. Firemen and policemen, ambulance crews, hospital staff and care assistants, engineers who monitor our power and water supplies, coastguards, newsreaders, merchant seamen, farmers, people with jobs in hotels and restaurants – all keeping essential services going so we can enjoy our celebrations without giving them a second thought. They're not in church even if they would like to be – for them it's just another ordinary working day. It would be a good idea to say thank you to God for them all, as part of our Christmas prayers.

It was just an ordinary working day and night for those shepherds, too. There they were, out in the field, huddled around a fire to keep warm and scare off any wild animals. Maybe they were even chewing coffee berries to stay awake – did you know that coffee is supposed to have been discovered by a middle-eastern shepherd who noticed that when his flock browsed on one particular sort of bush they became unusually lively and skittish. They probably chatted a bit, perhaps about how busy Bethlehem had suddenly become – all those people arriving for the census, prices sky-high in the market, everyone milling around looking for a meal and for somewhere to stay, and apparently not a single spare room anywhere in the town. At least they'd avoid the tax collection – they were some of the poorest people around, and if they let the fire go out and a lion or a jackal grabbed a lamb, they'd have to pay its value to the boss. Just another ordinary working night.

Then – was that something in the sky? A flash of light? They rubbed their eyes – it was still there. They nudged each other – was that really a man? Shining bright, and with wings? Those berries had never made them see things before. And he was talking to them – not the wind, but real words. Saviour – Messiah – king – born today down in Bethlehem. Then, like the punch-line of a bad joke – the king was a baby born in a stable. And then there were hordes of the shining things, lighting up the whole sky and singing – and then they vanished and it all went quiet.

Imagine the discussion. Was it a hallucination? Why were they being told this? Someone knew it was all rubbish – must have been something odd in the beer they'd been drinking. Should they go – and if they did, what about the sheep? Suppose someone found out that they'd left them? Finally, although they still didn't understand, it all seemed so odd that they did go to see. If you'd been watching, you'd just have seen a group of scruffy, grubby, rather smelly people going to an ordinary stable, a place they knew well and sometimes worked in. It's just as well the king wasn't born in a palace. They'd never have been let in.

The real punch-line is that God comes to ordinary people at ordinary times and in ordinary places – he comes where they are. The shepherds heard about Jesus while they were at work, and found him in a familiar, everyday place. Throughout his life Jesus talked and worked with ordinary people, ate and drank with them, told them stories, healed, helped and inspired them. And ever since then, that has been the Christian experience. We don't have to go and find God; he comes to meet us, because he's always here. We just need two things – an open mind, and a nudge. The shepherds were nudged by angels and were open-minded enough to act on what they'd been told. (What about that sceptic who didn't go? How did he feel when the others came back and told him what they'd seen?)

Maybe there's a nudge waiting for you, perhaps from a friend, or something you've read or seen? Maybe a nagging feeling that there must be more to life? Maybe some words on a Christmas card, or a quiet moment gazing at the crib? When you feel it, don't be all cool and modern and cynical. Give it a chance. Go and see – follow where it leads. When you do, you'll find God there already, waiting for you. In whatever format it came, you will have heard the message of the angels. And the really good news is that it is never too late. The shepherd who stayed behind can still go. You may have ignored that feeling before, but it's come again. So let us go now to Bethlehem, and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.