

The Shepherds' Faith – Sunday 21 December 2025
Luke 2: 8-20

Our reading sets a familiar scene recorded on so many Christmas cards and acted out at school nativity plays up and down the country. A lovely pastoral scene with fluffy white lambs – but Luke chose to focus on this event to try and teach us something.

Like Mary, the shepherds had received an angelic message. They listened, overcome their fears, followed directions and went out into the world sharing the joyful news with others. By considering what they did, we can learn about how we should be responding to the promises of Christmas.

Most importantly, ordinary people can meet the Messiah.

The shepherds were poor, outcasts, the bottom rung of the social ladder. They were uneducated, unwashed and smelling of sheep – yet God went out of his way to ensure they were the first to hear the news. Just as they were.

We need to allow ourselves to be interrupted and be willing to let God come to us just as we are and probably when we least expect it. But think of the result.

What the shepherds discovered led to joy and praise and they couldn't help but share it with others. There is joy in sharing things – think about going out for a wonderful restaurant meal, having a new delicious dish and sharing a taste of this with your fellow diners.

Psalm 34 v8 says 'taste and see that the Lord is good'.

In the same way that we'd share food, we should share what God means to us - not in a weird or unnatural way but just in a friendly and loving way, sharing of the goodness of God in our lives. Let's make this our Christmas challenge. Let God interrupt us and share the joy with others.

In Israel, Shepherds were outcasts, unseen and unloved. With God, no-one is unseen. Think about the unseen around you – the neighbour whose name you don't know, the postman, the plumber who fixed your burst pipe – do we really see these people? Let's show kindness and love to the unseen.

The shepherds responded in faith – they hurried to Bethlehem.

When they got there they didn't 'do' anything - they just observed. There was no work to do, no task to do. They found Jesus and beheld him.

Christmas is often a time of endless tasks. Get the tree up and decorated, gifts to buy, food to prepare, cards to write, invitations to attend. A season of doing.

We can make our faith that way too...feeling like we should always be doing faith.

Come and rest in his presence – feel his peace fill us and know we don't need to do anything. Observe the miracle of his birth, recognise the gift of his presence and thank him for the invitation to commune with him for all eternity.

Tim Keller suggests that we should consider certain things about the shepherds' faith.

Firstly, to Hear Well

The shepherds heard direct from angels – but everyone else heard from human beings who were very likely not as eloquent or impressive speakers. It's a reminder to us all not to dismiss something by focusing on who is telling it to us. We mustn't miss out on it because we're only focusing on who is saying it.

Luke also reports that Mary "pondered" what she heard from the shepherds. The Greek word used here means - to put in context, to connect, to think something out.

Psalm 119 v 130 says 'The unfolding of your words gives light'. What looks like a simple bible verse at first, when unfolded or pondered on, can be discovered to have multiple and endless personal applications, far more than imagined with a cursory glance.

Mary not only pondered she also "treasured" what she'd heard. This relates to emotions, keeping something alive. She's taking it into her heart so she can relish it and experience it. Taking something into your heart is allowing it to affect you deeply, keep alive the reminder of the preciousness, the value, the wonder and the power of the particular thing you are treasuring.

If we don't do these two things – ponder and treasure the word of God we will not truly hear the message. Your ears will hear, but if you don't take it into your mind and heart, it won't sink in and have the opportunity to change you.

Secondly Make Peace

Our passage contains one of the most famous Christian texts – 'on earth peace, good will toward men'.

Peace in the bible is not about a trouble free life. The most important peace is peace with God. We want to be king or queen of our own lives and destiny when this is actually hostile to God's authority over us. We believe we can only be truly happy when we are wholly in charge of our lives and in turn this self-centred approach can often bring us into conflict with other human beings.

The first step to true peace with God is to recognise and rest in the knowledge that no matter what we have done, or do, we are saved by grace. If we each make peace with God, we can then go out and make peace with everybody else. Christmas should represent the increase of peace – both with God and with everyone right across the world.

And finally Fear Not - Behold

The shepherds were terrified. All encounters with angels are accompanied by the words 'do not be afraid'. They were divine messengers from the spiritual realm,

beings of immense power, radiant blinding glory. Naturally anyone seeing such a being would be afraid. However if someone is filled with fear they won't be able to receive the message that they are trying to bring them. Fear can entangle us and take over our lives.

The Christmas message is 'fear not.'

We can all experience true joy, like the shepherds.

The Christmas story is an ongoing invitation to meet Jesus, experience his presence and live in relationship with him. We don't need to have it all together, we don't need to be ready, we don't need all the answers. Each of us is enough, we are seen, we just need to Hear, to Respond, to Fear Not and to Behold.

Amen

Carol Elsasser