

Christmas Day

Isaiah 9: 2-7

Titus 2: 11-14

Luke 2: 1-20

Sharing the Story

It seems from a close reading of today's gospel that our nativity scene is missing quite a few characters. And I am not referring to an angelic multitude of the heavenly host. Let's just hear verses 16 to 18 again.

16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them

'and all who heard it were amazed...'

That sounds like a larger group of people than just Joseph and Mary alone in the stable with the new-born Jesus, and I am sure Luke isn't referring to any animals who were sharing the space in the stable. So, who might they have been?

Well, for starters, how about the innkeeper and his wife. And what about other guests from the innkeeper's rooms, probably woken by Mary in labour and the cries of the baby Jesus – unless we assume Mary's labour was pain-free and the baby Jesus was totally silent as some Victorian carols suggest.

And in a small town, when it was known Mary was in labour, I am sure that the local experienced midwife would have arrived to help with the delivery. For this was the town of Joseph's descendants and

word would have got around quickly. Relatives, no matter how distant, of the same lineage, of David's line, would have been honour-bound to help. It is unthinkable in that society that she would have been left alone to give birth, even supposing Joseph was able to help.

And what had the shepherds told the people they had met when they left their flocks to go into to Bethlehem?

The shepherds had been told by the angel, "to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is the Messiah, the Lord". The shepherds also experienced that hardly imaginable sight of the multitude of heaven praising God.

The angel hadn't said a lot. The angel didn't really need to. Even the poorly educated shepherds would have known the prophets' descriptions of the Messiah, the one anointed by God to be God's agent on earth, to pick up and continue the line of rulers and kings of Israel that had not been in place since before the exile in Babylon over 500 years before. This was a momentous time in the history of Israel. A moment of great joy. A moment that for centuries all Israel had longed for and prophets had said would come. The people had been waiting for someone to restore the fortunes of Israel, delivering God's people from their opponents, and for some they had been waiting for a messiah to appear who would usher in a new age; an age of prosperity and peace.

Our reading from Isaiah chapter nine gives us four titles for the Messiah, who will occupy the throne of David with justice and righteousness. The shepherds would have known these titles and what lay behind each of them:

- ✚ Wonderful Counsellor, indicating a ruler who listens and makes just and wise judgments, creating harmony where there had been discord;
- ✚ Mighty God, indicating the divine kingship of the ruler

- ✝ Everlasting father, indicating a role as a fatherly protector of the people that would never end
- ✝ Prince of Peace, indicating the nation would be led without recourse to wars, a nation that would live in God's shalom – a deep peace and well-being of the people and the land – and naturally that would lead to a stable and prosperous time for ever more.

I think that the 'all who heard' the shepherds' story of the message of the angel and the appearance of the multitude of the heavenly host refers to all those who had gathered. Most of them were not key players in the story, the characters normally in our nativity scenes, but nevertheless the first witnesses and the first to hear the shepherds' remarkable story, and stare with wonder at the scene before them.

Could God really come in to such a place, rather than into a nice house, or a ruler's palace? But this assorted bunch of people heard what the shepherds' said, and looked at them, noting their joy and excitement, and were amazed... and I am sure, they believed.

All who heard, would have eventually left the stable, weary after a disrupted night's sleep. The Innkeeper and his wife, the innkeeper's paying guests, the local midwife, and no doubt a few others. I wonder how they slept. Would they have stayed up chatting about all that had happened? Would they have been excited at the prospect of God's anointed one being in their midst as a baby, with the prospect that this baby would one day rule their nation of Israel. Did some think this baby would grow up and be destined to overthrow their oppressive Roman rulers?

Those shepherds shared their joy, their personal experiences. They told their story. The other people who I admittedly speculate attended and heard the shepherds' story would have also shared

their story, what they had witnessed and what the shepherds' had told them.

So many others have shared their stories since then of God's involvement, participation, partnership, and of how the life and teachings of Jesus has led them to want to follow his example; to live a life based on love and justice, love and peace, love aimed at lifting us up, love aimed at lifting up all who are in need; the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the ill and those prisoner to their unhealthy thoughts and habits.

The unsuspecting shepherds were transformed that night, the most humble and lowliest in that society became the carriers of the good news, bringing it right to the door of the stable, sharing it with all gathered around the stable that night.

We have a wonderful story to tell; of God's love come down, of Jesus' example we are all called to follow as best we are able. Let us be like the humble shepherds, charged with the good news of the birth of Christ, our Lord and Saviour, wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father and prince of peace. Let us be like the humble shepherds and kneel in adoration before this baby, as we contemplate their words. Let us be like the humble shepherds and share the story, glorifying and praising God.

This Christmas story doesn't mention all who would have been there, who heard the shepherds wondrous story; the innkeeper and his wife, their guests, others who gathered from the neighbouring houses to celebrate a birth and share the joy and happiness of the mother of God and Joseph.

As we leave our visitation to the new-born baby Jesus today, what is the story we tell each other, chatting just as those who gathered in the stable would have done? Who will we share this wondrous story with that changed the world forever, that continues to change the

world, that transforms all who come to know and love Jesus? How might we tell of the coming of the Lord and saviour and spread the good news?

But for now, let us finish with the words of the heavenly host as they celebrated the birth of Jesus, as we rejoice with hope, peace, joy and love to the news of the birth of God-with-us, Emmanuel:

'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours'