

## Christmas Eve Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

As we gather together on this most holy evening we are expectant and filled with joy. Just like the relatives of a woman who has gone into labour we wait for the news that the baby has arrived and all is well. Most of us can relate to that state of heightened excitement mixed with a little nervousness too. Similarly, we may have memories of childhood Christmas Eves where we are excited and nervous all at once, there will be joy in the day to come but will there be the special gift I have hoped and wished for, will my family and friends like the offering I have prepared for them? Maybe little has changed and you still go to bed on Christmas Eve in this nervously excited state!

It is notable, that we hold these feelings at this time of the year, and often we imagine that those involved with the first 24 hours of Jesus' life were similarly excited and expectant. The shepherds are a fine example of a group who were far from expecting to be visiting a newborn that night. When they wrapped up for the cold night ahead and settled down in the field with their sheep that night it's difficult to imagine that anything was further from their mind than the prospect of the birth of child in the town up the road. These men were anything but excited, they were working, cold, uncomfortable and probably a bit bored at the prospect of a night shift watching over the sheep.

For the shepherds, then, this was not a night of expectancy as much as a night full of surprises and not a small measure of fear. As the prophet Isaiah testifies, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" for the shepherds this was literally the case. In the night an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. The brightness was indescribable; it would have split the night and it certainly drew from them a fearful response because the first words uttered by the angel were "Do not be afraid". Then the angels told the shepherds how to find Jesus, they sang to them before leaving with as little warning as they had arrived.

There is no doubt that this was an incredible, miraculous and surprising night for the shepherds, but perhaps the most surprising of all is that they went to find this baby boy. So moved by the message of the angels, these shepherds were drawn to Bethlehem, they left their sheep and went to find this child. It is hard to imagine convincing a group of shepherds to leave their sheep in the middle of the night under any circumstances, but here they were walking down the mountainside to seek out a baby boy born to strangers visiting the town.

That is what Jesus can do. From the moment of his birth he was drawing people to himself, albeit with a little help from the angels in the beginning! Over the ages and to this very evening, Jesus continues to draw people in, particularly when we tell of the circumstances of his birth. Carol services and Christmas celebrations in our towns and localities are not just attractive because we have always done them and they are a part of our tradition, although that does play a role in their popularity. But they are more than that, through song, story and the sense of love shared at such events, we catch a glimpse of the Good

News that Jesus came to bring and we seek it out. There are people who hardly ever attend Church and for many reasons feel unable to regularly join in with Christian fellowship, but they never miss worship at Christmas. Why? Because it is a time when Christ calls us in a very special way, it is just as it was for the those shepherds for some, a time when out of nowhere they feel a call to stop what they are doing and take a moment to gaze on the gift God gave to the world, Jesus the Messiah.

Just as people speak of “thin” places where it is easier to pray or encounter something of God such as on mountaintops or in ancient Church buildings, there are also “thin” times in the year and in our lives where we are open to hear that call. May this Christmas be one such time where in the midst of the busyness and the disrupted routines, each one of us may find time to pause and consider God’s call in our lives. Are we, like the shepherds, ready to drop everything to seek out Jesus, are we ready to approach him without fear and receive from him by grace the love which he holds for us all? Will we go back to our usual patterns of life filled with joy at the glory and generosity of God’s gift to us? Will we leave this place reassured of God’s love for us, shown in the life, sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus? Let us pray that this may be so, for each of us and those with whom we share our lives.

Amen.