

Christmas Day – Luke 2.8 – 20

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Come and behold...

Yesterday we left the shepherds with all their fears out in the fields, today we read how that fear is turned towards hope as they decide to set off for Bethlehem to try and find this newborn baby so carefully described to them by the angel. I wonder if you have ever made a journey like this, one where you set out with hope for finding something, even though you are not quite sure whether it even exists.

The journey the shepherds decide together to take is one of invitation, the angel says to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people' (v10 NRSV). That 'for see' is what makes them get up and go to Bethlehem – I've often wondered if they took their sheep or left them behind or what... but whatever they do with the sheep they do go to see. If we look at the Greek text what the angel says is perhaps something more like, 'don't be fearing, be perceiving – for I am telling you the Gospel'. Older translations of the bible say, 'for behold...'. In other words, 'shepherds, to really understand what I am saying you must go and look, look with your eyes and understand with your heart and mind' – that is what perceiving really means, I think.

I wonder if this could be true for us, this principle of beholding and then not being afraid. If we take time to really try to comprehend what is in the Gospel message then I know, and you can too, that it will 'remove the fear that has dominated and darkened your life', to quote Tim Keller. So, what is this Gospel on which we are to gaze, to reflect, to understand, - well simply it is that our Saviour has been born. That's what the shepherds went to see, that's what we also can see, perceive, with our own hearts and minds. If we want to get over that fear of rejection by God that Adam and Eve discovered and that we also are prey too, if we want to be completely forgiven for our broken relationship with God then we only have to realise that he has already saved us in Jesus and then come and behold... which in turn will lead us to trust and find new life in him.

In these difficult days trust and new life can almost seem out of reach. Around the world every nation is endeavouring to put their trust (some are more successful at this than others) in their leaders and their medical professionals to deal with the issues that the Covid-19 virus is bringing, in order that soon we will be able to create 'new' lives where we have no need to fear it anymore. Notice that I don't say normal, we are people whose lives have been changed by this experience as we have all learnt to live in different ways, shopping, working, education, to name just three aspects are all very different now to the beginning of 2020. Our experience has created new norms for us and some of those will remain as we move forwards.

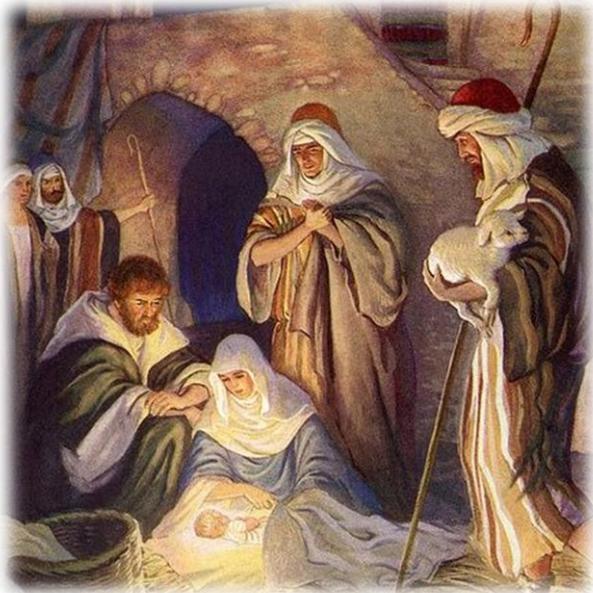
One thing I am however sure of, that hasn't changed, is that if we can come and behold our Saviour then we can find comfort and joy. The shepherds certainly found that as they shared their joy with anyone who would listen, and probably those who didn't want to, too! They explained what they had beheld and understood, that the Saviour was not a mighty general with an army, no, the Saviour was the tiny baby who came to live with us, gave up all that he had, the glory of heaven, to come and dwell amongst the people who needed his comfort and joy. Everyone was amazed at what the shepherds said about this tiny baby. I guess – scripture doesn't say at this point – that they would have been thinking again about the scriptures they knew – would the Saviour really start life like this? *'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel' (Isaiah 7.14)* and *'But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.'* (Micah 5.2) But the more they pondered, the more they reflected, the more they perceived, and not only them but Mary herself too.

The Greek word for pondered means something like put into context, make connections, think something out. I wonder how much pondering you do...about the things that you come and behold. Have you got one of those jackets that can be stuffed into a tiny pouch for easy carrying? When you take the jacket out it is many times the size of the pouch. The Bible is similar to this, what looks like a simple statement when you read it, is pondered upon then it can hold profound meaning and personal application far more than you could ever get with a cursory glance.

The come and behold of Christmas is just like that, as we come and behold so we can find, like the shepherds did, the comfort and joy of Immanuel, God with us. Finding the God who is with us will have profound meaning and personal application for each and every one of us – so will you, will you come and behold this year, perhaps for the very first time. Will you find the deep comfort and joy that this can bring... I pray that you will. Amen.

Prepared by Sue Willetts

Christmas Day Prayers led by Fiona Barber



God of God, Light of Light, born this happy morning.
As we come to celebrate the good news
we rejoice in your Holy birth.

This is a Christmas like no other, in these difficult days
may the love of God the Father bring us
and those we love unexpected comfort,
connecting hearts that are apart.

When so many are lonely, isolated and struggling
when the world around us can feel so full of darkness,
as we come and behold you Lord,
as we hear the glad tidings of the angels
may the hope of God the Son born in such unusual circumstances
shine a little light today and surprise us with joy this Christmas.

May the peace of God the Holy Spirit comfort all those who have lost loved ones,
for all those who are unwell. For those who are suffering because of this pandemic.

May we be reminded that we are never alone, for God is with us when others cannot be.
He is the light that shines in darkness and gives us immeasurable hope in spite of everything.

God of God, Light of Light, born this happy morning.
As we come to celebrate the good news
we rejoice in your Holy birth.

Glory to God in the highest and peace to His people on earth. Amen.