

## St Marylebone Parish Church

### First Mass of Christmas 2017 *Tonight belongs to the shepherds*

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

As we read through the Christmas story, we meet some rather extraordinary characters.

There are the exotic philosopher magicians from the east; a despotic king, of truly pantomimic proportions; a pregnant teenager from the sticks and an aging builder-carpenter. There are heavenly messengers, too, and you can throw into this heady mix – a collection of assortment livestock!

If the characters are not bizarre enough for you, just think on the exotic locations where the action takes place: a quiet hill town in Galilee, an already-ancient but long-bypassed town in Judaea, a nation's capital city and the palm-fringed banks of the Nile where the overshadowing pyramids are already 3000 years old.

A location manager-cum-casting agent's dream.

No wonder the story has captured the imagination of countless millions since its first telling.

But there is one group of characters I have left out – the shepherds.

Everyone loves the shepherds, with their tea-towel headdresses and walking stick crooks – very useful in getting errant cuddly lambs out of those nasty hard-to-reach rocky crevices.

In many ways this holy night belongs to the shepherds.

They were the ones to whom the message of Jesus' birth is first proclaimed.

They are the ones who abandon their flocks on the rough hillsides outside Bethlehem and rush towards an outhouse cave somewhere around the back of an overbooked travellers rest.

Not only are the shepherds the first to hear the Good News that God has visited his people, but to see the extraordinary things which have happened; to gaze in wonder on the Christ Child who has been wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a feeding trough.

Trevor Dennis<sup>i</sup>, reminds us through his many writings that when we approach the all-too-familiar world around us - including the pages of scripture and the things of faith - that we have to do so as if for the very first time.

If we don't, then what we experience will simply "not hold any surprises for us anymore".<sup>ii</sup>

So what surprises might the all-too-familiar shepherds have for us, especially for those of us who have celebrated many Christmases and who might have read or heard the Christmas stories thousands of times over?

First of all, the shepherds are nomads, Bedouin herders, of no fixed abode. As such, they lived their lives somewhat outside the religious and civil laws of Palestine. They were then, as indeed they are today, outsiders, out of sight, out of mind, beyond the safe confines of civilized, ordered society.

Yet these are the people to whom the eternal Godhead chooses to reveal his plan of salvation!

This Messiah, says Luke, is not going to be like all other Messiahs – surrounded by flunkies and sycophants; the great and the powerful.

Here is a Messiah for the little people, the forgotten ones; those whom no one really notices or about whom no one really cares.

This Messiah, as John Dominic Crossan,<sup>iii</sup> has put it, will be the ruler of a “kingdom of nobodies”.

No one makes it clearer than Luke, that the Good News is not *just* good-news-for-everyone, but that it is the very-best-of-all-news for those who are used always to coming last!

Here is the Great Little One, not in a royal nursery - but in a stable. Here is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords whose first visitors are not chamberlains and politicians or heads of state - but shepherds, the little people, the forgotten people, the people on the outside, those who more than anyone *need* to hear some good news.

Jesus invites us, whosoever we are, rich or poor, influential or of no account or notice, to come to him and in doing so find him to be the Way, the Truth and the Life<sup>iv</sup>, but his first invitation is to those who find themselves at the very back of the queue of life, those who are never invited forward when the prizes are given out; the sick, the sad, the lonely; those who have nothing of the good things this world has to offer.

Jesus birth takes place far from the centres of power and influence and his death, 30 or so years later, takes place not in a grand public arena but on an ignominious hillside nailed to rough-hewn cross. Yet, it is in these places – the stable of Bethlehem and on Calvary outside Jerusalem’s walls, that God

reveals his full majesty in perfect love and mercy for all who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Through the message of the angels, the shepherds are invited deep into the very heart of divine love - and they respond to God's invitation with alacrity as they go on to discover a tiny new-born child, who is God's perfect Gift to them and to all of creation.

May we hear God's the invitation; hurry with the shepherds to the manger and, with them, find him to be our way into the divine heart of God's eternal love.

And when we do find him, may we like the shepherds hurry on to tell others what WE have heard and seen!

Happy Christmas!

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Trevor Dennis, one-time school chaplain, Old Testament Studies tutor at Salisbury and Wells Theological College, and finally Canon Chancellor and Vice Dean at Chester Cathedral, retired in 2010

<sup>ii</sup> Dennis, T., *The Christmas Stories*, SPCK, 2007

<sup>iii</sup> Irish-American New Testament scholar, historian of early Christianity, and former Roman Catholic priest

<sup>iv</sup> John 14.6