

## **The Shepherds at Midnight**

*Titus 3.4–7; Luke 2.8–20*

Sermon at the Cathedral Midnight Eucharist

Christmas 2007

by the Bishop of Durham, Dr N. T. Wright

The choir had been practicing for hours, and the singers were tired. But the conductor kept them at it. This was the most amazing music they were ever going to sing, and they were only going to get one chance at it. Had to be right first time. Finally they were there: one last run-through, and it was perfect. But then one of the singers asked a question.

‘How come we only get to sing this once? This is fantastic music: wouldn’t it be better if we could give several performances, in different places to different audiences?’

‘No,’ replied the conductor. ‘This music is for a very special occasion. It’s only to be sung the once – at least by you. Once you’ve done that, the people who’ve heard it will have to learn to sing it for themselves.’

The conductor was God himself. The singers were the angels. The audience were the shepherds, and through them everyone who heard about it. And the special occasion is tonight. The birth of God’s own son.

I’ve been thinking about shepherds quite a lot recently, because (though the newspapers have forgotten about it) the outbreak of foot and mouth in September, caused by a careless leak from a government laboratory at the other end of the country, has meant that the shepherds in the hills and dales not far from here have again been facing dark nights and despair. I spoke this morning with two hill farmers who are trying to help their colleagues come to terms with the fact that they made no money this last year and may make none next year. The hill farmers are fiercely independent people but now rely totally on handouts and charity. They are buying expensive feed for the lambs who should have been sold three months ago, and they aren’t even sure whether to breed new lambs for next spring because the whole cycle has been so badly disrupted.

And it isn’t only the farmers who have faced ruin. Several businesses in the Dales are up for sale, because when the lambs don’t get sold the money isn’t spent in the shops. A whole way of life is at stake, not just for the hill farmers themselves but for the whole countryside. And, despite the best efforts of several of us, the government has done next to nothing. One MP said to me in frustration that it was impossible to find anyone in DEFRA who either knew or cared what was actually going on. And just when there was a build-up of pressure on the government, someone imagined there might be a general election, and everyone chattered merrily in fantasy-land – and by the time the hue and cry had died down the farmers and shepherds were last month’s news.

And I find myself asking, what has the song of the angels, sung to those Bethlehem shepherds on the first Christmas eve, got to say to our own shepherds who wait in the

darkness for any glimmer of light? And, standing behind the shepherds as it were, I glimpse also the patients who can't get proper treatment in our Health Service; the asylum seekers who are honestly trying to make a new life but who get picked up at 4 in the morning and shipped back into a nightmare; and the people in several walks of life who give up sensible causes and projects rather than face the mountains of compliance paperwork whose sole function is to tick the bureaucrats' boxes so it can't be their fault, while in the real world outside real people suffer injustice and misery.

You all know what I'm talking about. Whenever this kind of conversation starts up everyone chips in with their own local example. Now I have no quarrel with the serious, hard-working administrators, including no doubt many of you, who do a decent job and keep the wheels turning. But over the last few decades the wheels may have been turning but nobody seems to be steering the car, and it's now heading down the wrong road at increasing speed. And I come back to the shepherds – both to our own shepherds up the Dales and the shepherds out in the dark hills of Judaea. What did the angels' song mean to them, and what might it mean for us tonight, listening in? And – what might it sound like if we learned to sing it ourselves?

Before the heavenly choir even begins to sing, the principal angel has something to say to the shepherds. Here is the good news, the news which doesn't hit the papers because it isn't gossip-column stuff but real, solid, build-your-life-on-it reality: to you is born this day the Saviour, the one who is Messiah and Lord. And let's be clear. Either that is the most solid truth in the world or we are wasting our time here tonight and Richard Dawkins is right and we ought to go home and have a drink and forget the whole thing. But if it's true – if it's true that the child born at Bethlehem that night was and is the Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord – then that must translate into something far more solid and life-changing and community-rescuing than simply a warm nostalgic inner glow, much though we all rightly enjoy that too.

The Bethlehem shepherds were near the bottom of the social and financial pile. For them, the thought of a new King who would rescue Israel from her misery and establish his reign of justice and peace on the earth, was indeed, as the angel said, good news of great joy. But how was that to work itself out? As we read on in Luke's gospel, we find that the grown-up Jesus wasn't the sort of king who rides into town, kills off all his enemies, and establishes a dictatorship where everyone simply gets told what to do. He spoke of his kingdom coming like seeds growing secretly, like a shepherd going to look for the lost sheep, like the vineyard owner letting out the vineyard to tenant farmers and coming back to collect the fruit. The kingdom was indeed coming, but it didn't look like people thought it would. Yet Luke, in telling this story of the shepherds, clearly believes that it is indeed good news, good news for the world in which emperors think they run the show but in fact God runs it.

And we who worship this Jesus on this holy night – we who listen again to the song which the angels sang once and once only – we who begin to glimpse the reality that in Jesus heaven and earth really did come together – we now have the responsibility to learn to sing the song for ourselves, and so to discover what it might look like in practice for

Jesus really to be the Saviour, the King, the Lord in this sad old world. The Christmas message is about the reality of God becoming flesh – part and parcel of our reality, with all the suffering and puzzlement that goes with that. And this God-in-the-flesh is indeed the Lord of the world, defeating his enemies through his death and rising to rule and rescue the whole creation. We cannot stress this too strongly: Jesus is not simply Lord in a distant heaven on the one hand and Lord in our private hearts and lives on the other, leaving the real public world untouched. If he is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all. For Luke, it is quite clear: the angels meant what they said, but the way to that meaning is through Jesus' followers picking up the threads of his own public career and living as kingdom-people under his direction, bringing his saving rule to bear in acts of love and mercy, in working for justice and truth whether it's for the shepherds up the Dales or the asylum-seekers desperate for help or the entire planet as human greed and carelessness make it a place of danger and pollution instead of joy and beauty.

The key to it all is found in that angelic song: Glory to God in heaven, and peace among his people on earth. And these are not two different things. The whole point of Christmas is that in Jesus, born in Bethlehem, heaven and earth have come together, so that giving glory to God in the highest heaven is directly, one might almost say umbilically, linked to working for peace and justice at his behest here on earth. And it's time to start all over again, as Christmas people, to think what it might look like if this Jesus really is the Lord of the world, and if we who worship him are to work for his kingdom here and now, among the shepherds and the mining communities and the immigrants and all those on the edge of hopelessness.

Let's put it bluntly: we can't assume that our present institutions are working properly and just need more time and better computers. Many have pointed out that our much-prized western democracy isn't working properly any more, and there are no signs that our present politicians are interested in making it do so. We need fresh vision, fresh leadership, fresh wisdom which will slice through the tired old systems of this world and bring rescue, salvation with skin on it, to those who badly need it. We need to listen hard to the angels' song and learn how to sing it ourselves:

Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long;  
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong;  
And man, at war with man, hears not the love-song which they bring:  
O hush the noise, ye men of strife –

(and ye men of self-interest, of inept bureaucracy, of the insolence of office, hiding behind filing cabinets while people despair at your incompetence – hush the noise of your own self-importance)

and hear the angels sing.

Yes, and hear the shepherds weep as well.

But what will make the cacophany of human folly fall silent quicker than anything else is the strong, steady sound of those who love Jesus and celebrate his birthday singing his praises as Saviour, Messiah and Lord, and letting that praise inform and transform our public as well as our private lives. That is what Christmas is all about.

Earlier this evening, a two-year old, getting to know the Christmas story, asked his Mummy if Jesus would be actually there when we celebrate his birthday tomorrow. He's heard a lot about this Jesus, and he's been to other birthday parties; will he meet Jesus himself tomorrow? That little boy's parents, and indeed his grandparents, have some interesting explaining to do around the dinner table. But the answer cannot be that Jesus isn't actually here, that he is simply absent. The answer must be – Luke's answer must be, the angels' answer must be, our answer must be – that you will see him at work, when those who praise him and celebrate his birth go off to make his praise echo around the homeless shelters and the prisons, the asylum camps and the hospitals, the government departments and local councils, the homes where tragedy has struck and the hearts that are broken with grief, yes, and even the dark hills where the shepherds wait to see if the angels might just sing again. And if you add Matthew's gospel as well, we find a further haunting truth: that if you want to see Jesus, learn to look for him in the faces of those in need, those in tears, those in hospital, those in prison.

Let us praise this Jesus tonight from a full and glad heart; let us celebrate his birth with everything we've got; and then let's go and bring God glory in heaven by bringing peace and justice to his people on earth. The angels sang their song. They did a good job. It's time we learned to sing it back to them.