

Christmas Day, 25th December 2023

As I said at the beginning of this service, “I wish you all a wonderful Christmas!” You've heard the Christmas story dozens of times. This morning, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, I want us to step back and consider for a moment the lot of the shepherds.

In S Luke's Gospel, shepherds are the first to hear about the birth of Jesus. Being a shepherd in first century Palestine was not considered to be a privileged position in society. Joachim Jeremias, a German Lutheran biblical scholar who died in 1979, wrote the following in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: "The dryness of the ground made it necessary for the flocks of sheep and cattle to move about during the rainless summer and to stay for months at a time in isolated areas, far from the owner's home. Hence, herding sheep was an independent and responsible job; indeed, in view of the threat of wild beasts and robbers, it could even be dangerous. Sometimes the owner himself (Luke 15:6; John 10:12) or his sons did the job. But usually, it was done by hired shepherds, who only too often did not justify the confidence reposed in them." We find some reference to this in S John 10:12-13.

We should remember that some of Israel's great heroes were shepherds – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. Both Psalm 23 and Jesus compare God's care to that of a Good Shepherd. But in the first century, it seems, shepherds – specifically, hireling shepherds – had a rather unsavoury reputation. Jeremias, from whom we heard earlier, cited Rabbinic sources to the effect that "most of the time they were dishonest and thieving; they led their herds onto other people's land and pilfered the produce of the land." Because they were often months at a time without supervision, they were often accused of

stealing some of the increase of the flock. Consequently, the faithful Jews were warned by the rabbis not to buy wool, milk, or kids from shepherds on the assumption that any of those were stolen property. Additionally, shepherds were not allowed to fulfil any judicial office or be admitted in court as witnesses.

A midrash, which is a teaching by a rabbi, on Psalm 23:2 reads, "There is no more disreputable occupation than that of a shepherd." The Jewish leaders often criticised shepherds as the nature of their work meant they could not always keep to religious rules, for example strict Sabbath observance.

The shepherds were constantly with their sheep, since the sheep were vulnerable to all kinds of trouble. "Keeping watch" comes from the Greek word φυλάσσω (phylassō), which means to carry out sentinel functions, to watch, or to guard. The shepherds made sure that the sheep were safe from both wandering off and injuring themselves, and also from dangers from thieves and wolves.

Despite the bad press that shepherds received it is significant that they were the first witnesses of the birth of Jesus. From this we can deduce that the message of Jesus was for all people, even those considered to be insignificant or marginalised.

One minute the shepherds were talking quietly in the blackness of the winter sky. The next moment the hillside was ablaze with light and booming with the sound of an angel's voice.

As our Gospel lection said "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." (2:9)

This appearance wasn't at a distance, but upfront and personal. "Appeared" is the Greek verb ἐφίστημι (ephistēmi), which here means to stand at or near a specific place. Often this use of the verb occurs with the idea of suddenness. The result in the shepherds is predictable – abject terror.

The angel spoke of a “saviour” and said he was “Christ the Lord”. This is an important detail about the identity of Jesus. ‘Christ’ is a Greek word and is the equivalent of the Hebrew Moshiach or ‘Messiah’. Both Christ and Messiah mean ‘the anointed one’. The angel's declaration, however, doesn't use the word "Christ" by itself, but in the phrase, "Christ the Lord." "Lord" is the Greek noun κυριος (kyrios), which means owner, lord, or master, of earthly beings as a designation of any person of high position. When Jews read the Hebrew Scriptures, whenever the divine name "Yahweh" appears, it is never pronounced, but the Hebrew noun 'ādōnî is substituted. The Greek Septuagint Old Testament usually employed kyrios, "Lord" to translate the Hebrew adonai. In English translations today we often see the word lord rendered completely in capitals; that is where the word Yahweh appeared in the original. Where the word Adonai appeared we are given a rendering of lord with a capital L.

What did the angel mean by putting these two words, christos and kyrios, together? This phrase is used nowhere else in the New Testament in exactly this way and must have a meaning for us.

After this announcement by the angel there appeared a great company of angels singing praises to God. The shepherds decided to look for this baby. They hurried to Bethlehem. Where do you find a manger? In a stable, of course. So they checked out the stables in the village and come across one with a baby sleeping in it. They met the Holy Family and shared with them

their story of the angelic visitation. Then they went and told others what the angels had told them, just like the villagers did after the remarkable birth of John the Baptist (1:65). The NIV's translation "spread the word" seems to miss the point, which is rendered well in the KJV and NRSV: "They made known what had been told them about this child." The angel's announcement of "a saviour, Christ the Lord" was spread throughout the area, resulting in amazement in the hearers.

As we gather on this Christmas morning there is an important question for us. Our answer is crucial. The question is: Have we got that same sense of amazement at the birth of Christ, the chosen one.