

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Christmas, 1 January 2023

Psalm 8, Galatians 4.4-7, Luke 2.15-21

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

After the visit by the angel, the shepherds went in haste to see the baby lying in the manger. They rushed. No time to think, not even about the sheep. Let's go!

Mary, on the other hand, was deeply troubled, and now she treasures the message delivered by the shepherds and she ponders. She reflects.

There is a time to act, to rush, to be spontaneous, and there is a time to stop and consider, and reflect.

The shepherds in this familiar story do have cause to hurry. They are visited by an angel, the night shines with terrifying glory, and the news is of a great joy. It is also an indirect invitation to discover their Saviour. And the shepherds respond to the invitation. In so doing, they leave behind their task, their responsibilities, their livelihood. They leave everything behind. And again, their haste is not without cause: the child, the angel has said, is the Messiah! The one who has come to offer great deliverance!

Is there anything more important they could be doing? No. And not only that, but they go around telling anyone who will listen. These are times to act, God calls.

When God calls, there may not be an angel, let alone a whole host of them. But when God calls, we recognise that now is the time to extricate ourselves from everything that keeps us from running to see. And to act in that kind of haste, we need to realise that there are things more important than the ones we are used to.

Will we recognize this year, the things that God calls us to? Will we act quickly, like the shepherds, or will we ponder and reflect like Mary?

In contrast to the shepherds' haste, Luke turns our attention to Mary's heart. We almost hear her questions: what does all this mean? What are all these words that Mary is pondering in her heart? What does she consider, worry about? What is filling and both calming and concerning her soul?

There is so much! There has been the call from God through the angel, the journey to Bethlehem for the census, the birth of the child, and now these crazy shepherds... What next?!

*Next* is exciting and frightening. It is full of hope and trepidation. We all wonder about what is next. We wonder about the future. And sometimes we wish we could see into it, just a little way. Sometimes we are glad we can't.

In our reality, what comes to mind is the war in Ukraine; the Covid crisis in China; our economy; inflation and job losses; increasing poverty and inequalities.

In Mary's reality, we have this baby, born in poverty, who will be presented at the Temple according to tradition. And old Simeon will take him in his arms, he will praise God for the salvation he has seen, and he will make a terrible prediction, that of a sword that will pierce Mary's heart, when her child, become a man, dies on the cross.

And yet, Luke's Gospel presents good news indeed, for the marginalized, for the poor, for those low in status, for those who stand outside. The joyful celebration that has brought the shepherds to Mary announces the arrival of one who brings rescue and release to all nations on Earth. We can act in haste and run to see, or we can stop and ponder about what it really means.

The homeless and socially marginal shepherds, the poor and the lowly are dearest to God. The world has been turned upside down. This is both wonderful and frightening. It will bring healing and wholeness, and it will tear things apart between those who follow God's will and God's way and those who turn away from God.

Is that what Mary is pondering in her heart? Certainly, she is wondering about what God has done for her and what God has in store for her. She has been called to give a home to God. But what a tall order... The little child Jesus is the one who will stand humbly before John to be baptised, to receive, as John calls it, the baptism of repentance. Jesus identifies himself with us, the people who need to repent and turn to God. Jesus takes our place, shares our penitence, lives our life and ultimately dies our death. And when he comes up from the water of baptism and receives God's spirit, God's breath, it's in a new way: he is proclaimed God's Son. God has built a home in mankind, in us. We read in Psalm 8 how much God loves humans. He loves us that much.

Henri Nouwen said: 'God so much desired to fulfil our deepest yearning for a home that God decided to build a home in us.' A Saviour has entered the human story. All people are called to be children of God. Paul the apostle says it best: God sent his Son, born of a woman, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because we are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!' Further on in his letter to the Galatians, Paul says: 'the child Jesus was born of a woman who freely chose God'. She is pondering still, but she said yes to God. This freedom, we have it too. Freedom to choose God, freedom from sin, freedom from everything that separates us from God, freedom to come home to God, to let ourselves be fully known and embraced by God. We are all called to be part of the mystery of the incarnation

So with haste, like the shepherds, or with calm reflection like Mary, how about we put aside our own plans and submit to God's plan, God's will, God's peace around us? And then we too may be granted moments of vision, glimpses of God's greater reality. And at the centre of that sudden sight, we will find our loving father, affirming us as his children, equipping us, too, with his spirit, so that our lives may be changed, swept clean and made ready for use.

So this year, may we all come home to God.

Amen.