

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Over the last few weeks, in our Old Testament readings, we have heard the voice of the Prophet Isaiah ... a voice which spanned the exile in Babylon and foretold the fall of Jerusalem, a voice which contains wonderful words of encouragement and hope to God's people in exile. Don't despair, he says, there is light on the horizon.

A new era was about to dawn ...

No longer would Jerusalem be seen as abandoned by God ... forsaken and desolate.

As surely as the earth brings forth its shoots ... said Isaiah ... so God's good purposes will come to fruition. Their city would be given a new name, one which would reflect his new restored relationship with them. When that time came, said the Prophet, their fortunes would be so reversed that they would be seen "as a people the Lord had blessed."

What wonderful, glorious promises.

And, of course, with our Christmas readings the first shoots of those promises have come to fruition.

Jesus has been born of a virgin ... in Bethlehem ... and his birth has been made known ... but, *not* to the influential and powerful ... as one might expect ... but to those they despised ... a bunch of shepherds on the hillside outside Bethlehem.

To those who, because of the demands of their occupation, were unable to properly observe the Sabbath or to keep the meticulous hand-washing rules and regulations the law required... and so were seen almost as outcasts.

In the Old Testament, God himself is sometimes described as Israel's shepherd ... and, as we know, David was a shepherd boy turned king, but in first century Palestine, shepherds were despised by the religious people of the day.

The irony is, as some commentators point out, that the flocks these shepherds were tending may well have belonged to the Temple authorities; so that those to whom the birth of the Lamb of God was announced, were looking after the very flocks from which the Temple offerings were chosen.

The idea of shepherds out there under the stars ... conjures up a kind of romantic picture, fostered, probably, by pictures on our Christmas cards. But there on the hillside, in the darkness, shepherds would have needed to be constantly on the alert for thieves or marauding animals. They alone were responsible for their sheep ... would have known each by name ... and indeed would have had to make restitution for any that were missing ... no wonder a shepherd would leave the ninety and nine on the hillside and go in search of the one that was lost. Shepherding was no soft option.

The other day on the radio I heard someone talking about how much we have lost by having so much light around us, especially in the cities. We no longer experience either the wonder of the night sky, nor know what real darkness is like.

I'd like to invite you, just for a moment, to put yourselves in the shoes of those shepherds... on the hillside, in the darkness ... your ears cocked and your eyes straining, constantly on the alert for possible danger ...

Then imagine you are suddenly & unexpectedly swamped by intense light ... and confronted by angels ... How do you feel, I wonder ...? ... shocked ... awed ... frightened?

Luke tells us that the shepherds *were* terrified ... and you can't help wondering if there was a stunned silence there on the hillside after the angels had gone ... as they tried to grasp what it all meant.

Curiously, though, they didn't seem to doubt the angels credentials ... nor question his message ... Instead, they responded immediately, hurrying off with a great sense of urgency to seek out this child. But how were they to find him, given that the town was packed to capacity. Well, there is a clue ... and here it is .... "This shall be a '**sign**' to you, says the angel, he will be wrapped in cloths and *lying in a manger.*"

That's the unexpected twist in this story. But that's the *clue*. That's how they would find him.

Some years ago on the Antiques Road Show there was a particular episode where a painting was brought in. It had been bought for £1 at a car boot sale and used by its new owners as a tray in their caravan. It was so badly battered and scratched that you would never have dreamed it was worth anything ... Yet it turned out to be priceless. Unexpected treasure in an unexpected place.

You don't look for a precious gem on a market stall ... And that's, of course, why the shepherds needed a "sign".

But they still had to travel to Bethlehem ... to knock on doors ... to ask around ... to seek him for themselves ....before they were in a position to worship him ...and to share the wonder of their discovery with others.

Isn't that the same for you and I .....

And this moment ... when God's kingdom broke in upon the world of men ... was made known, not to the learned, the highly respected, nor to the Jewish religious establishment who were looking for *every* sign of his coming ... but to a bunch of despised shepherds on the hillside outside Bethlehem.

What clearer message could there be that God 's love, in Christ is for all who will accept him and believe in him.

As St John says in the opening chapter of his Gospel, "**to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God**" .... So that, as Paul makes clear, we are able to call him Abba, Father.

We know no more about the shepherds, other than that they went back to their flocks on the hillside ... but they had gone back praising and glorifying God. And you can't help thinking, can you, that for them this was a new beginning, as indeed it is for us when we seek him out and discover him for ourselves.

*Let us pray:*

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God from all eternity.*

*You came into our world from beyond the boundaries of time.*

*With the seekers of old, alert our hearts to the silent mystery of your coming; sharpen our yearning for the fullness of your love*

*And give us eyes to see you, the Saviour of the world.*

*Amen.*

