

Following up on Christmass!

Isaiah 61¹⁰-62³; Psalm 147^{7-end}; Galatians 4⁴⁻⁷; Luke 2¹⁵⁻²¹

The shepherds said to one another, Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place.'

When they saw this they made known what had been told them about the child.

Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2^{15,17,19,20})

Has anyone ever heard of what happened to the shepherds after their visit to Bethlehem? All we know is that they went back to their sheep **glorifying and praising God**, but there is nothing more. Yet, they were such a key part in Luke's birth stories - they were the first visitors to the new-born Jesus, the first to worship God in human form.

There is a real danger that all our efforts - finding the right gifts; stocking up as if for a siege; worrying about reactions and relationships; etc - end up in a similar anonymity: vital at the time but of no lasting consequence.

The first Christmass - and the subsequent ones too - only have any real benefit when their impact is measured retrospectively. When Luke tells us **Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart** he writes as an historian with the real possibility that he interviewed her about these things after the death and resurrection of Jesus (why else would this historical account be written from her prospective)?

- ✦ Luke's deliberate drawing attention to the shepherd's (rather than Matthew drawing attention to the Magi or the numerous other visitors that there will have been that are unrecorded) was to say something about the ministry of Jesus: the shepherds were outcasts, people who didn't fit and weren't generally welcomed in society. They couldn't, because of the hands-on nature of their job observe all the ceremonial law of Israel and so the orthodox looked down on them. It was for such as this that Jesus came!
- ✦ But it was these shepherds who would have had a part in providing the lambs for the ceremonies of the Temple - the Lambs that were slaughtered to remove the sin of the people. That, too, has a message about Jesus' purpose.

If it isn't the *feel-good factor* that has any lasting consequence (even if that does lead to **praising God**) then how do we follow up on Christmass?

- ✦ Law gives way to grace when Jesus is born! It is that simple. Law had been tried and it failed - so the time was right - **the fulness of time had come** - so Jesus was born. As Gabriel said (repeatedly) he would save his people from their sins (and themselves).
- ✦ Like the shepherd's Jesus makes all of us, previous the rejects from God's close society, not just acceptable, but as Paul says, **adopted**: we don't belong because we are guests. We belong because we are family!

It doesn't matter if we don't know what happened to the shepherds (or the Magi, for that matter). God had something for them to do, they did it and then relaxed into being celebrated as part of the story of Jesus.

Being a good Scot, the 31st is always a fairly reflective day: looking back over the year and ensuring, so far as in us lies, that everything that can be attended to has been attended to! So, consistent with that, it would be appropriate to pause and think about how we might be remembered and to take stock - have we done what God has for us to do?