

# The Shepherds Returned

*Readings: Luke chapter 2, verses 8 - 15*

Christmas is over. All that's left is to deal with the leftovers: — piles of wrapping paper; what's left of the turkey - and for some people a question of how to get rid of the hangover. For most people its back to work tomorrow. Which brings me to our text. **“The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”**

For those shepherds the first Christmas must have been an amazing experience. There was nothing special about the way it began: They had spent the day, like any other day, out on the hills above Bethlehem looking after their sheep. In the evening they penned them up and settled down to keep watch over them. Then suddenly and without warning, the sky lit up. An angel appeared and gave them the good news that a baby had been born in Bethlehem. This was followed by a heavenly choir singing an anthem. “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace”. They ran to Bethlehem, found a new-born child lying in a manger and knelt to worship.

Of course its poetry. .But that doesn't make it any less true. It is the curse of modern society that it is a fact-based culture. We are terrified by anything mysterious and inexplicable and we write it off as impossible or the wanderings of a deranged mind. Yet what can be scientifically analysed and proved is not the whole truth. And poetry and myth and story-telling contain just as much truth – perhaps even more.

So let us not denigrate the fairytale elements of the Christmas story. Scoff at the story of an angelic choir and a moving star if you will. But it will be your loss. For the story was not meant to be understood with a wooden literalism. It is there to engage our imagination. It is there to convey Truth beyond anything that a naïve literalism could do. And so the stories of Christ's birth, told very differently by Matthew and Luke, are pitched at a level far beyond the factual and the literal.

Back to the shepherds. They had an overwhelming experience and the validity of that experience is to be judged on the difference it makes. So the story of the shepherds ends with the statement that they returned to their homes and their work “Glorifying and praising God”. Things were different. Life was different. And they could not keep quiet about it.

## **So what can we learn from this story?**

1. Religion and real life cannot be separated. And real life is the sphere in which our religious belief and experience must be expressed. All too often we compartmentalise religion and work. We effectively separate the sacred from the secular. Our experience of God is one thing but it has precious little impact or influence upon the rest of our life. Least of all do we want to talk about it in the context of daily life.

If the Christmas story says anything at all it is that the distinction between sacred and secular is abolished. The beginning of the story finds the shepherds out in the fields going about their secular work when God broke through to them. And the conclusion of the story finds them going back to their secular occupation but with a different outlook and attitude.

St John's gospel makes the same point when he says; “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Because people in those days equated the “flesh” as the seat and source of all that was evil. They were shocked to the core by the suggestion that God should assume “flesh” and use it as the vehicle of His presence amongst us.

So what we do in our worship on Sunday is not something radically different to what we do at work on Monday. Worship and Work are not two different activities which must be separated and kept apart. Christmas says to us that Prayer and Politics; Communion and Commerce, Worship and Work are not separate activities but parts of a single whole.

2. The other thing we learn from this story is that our experience of God is not a solitary, private matter but one to be shared with others. The shepherds returned to their daily work but they did not keep quiet about what they had experienced. They spread the news of their experience far and wide.

Which leaves us with the question: — What will we be saying to others about our experience of Christmas? No doubt we shall share what presents we got; and how the turkey turned out to be a burnt offering — I can even tell you of how my Grandmother used methylated spirits instead of brandy on the Christmas pudding once! But dare we say that we went to Church and were moved to commit ourselves to the Christ Child and to His Way; His Life; His truth?

**Or would that be too embarrassing?**