

I don't know about you, but I am getting tired of the non-stop onslaught of Christmas "songs": *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*, *I'm dreaming of a White Christmas* (far from reality in the midst of the warmest winter in a century!), *Driving Home for Christmas* (possible joy for those who will be paying less than £1 for petrol) and so on. There is one song doing the rounds, written by George Michael and made popular this year by Taylor Swift, with an innocent sounding title, "Last Christmas". The words in the opening verse are:

Last Christmas, I gave you my heart  
But the very next day, you gave it away.  
This year, to save me from tears  
I'll give it to someone special

Narola and I were driving somewhere this past week when it came on the car radio. We were in one of those pauses of silence, which between married couples, is a sign of a good marriage (relationship), and compelled to listen to the song. The thought struck me, if this year the person wants to save her tears and give her heart to someone she calls "special", then the person to whom she gave her heart last year, was not special?!

As the song progressed, the jilted lover sings back and forth about wanting, then not wanting the person to whom she gave her heart last Christmas.

I guess, what bothers me about the song is that it uses "Christmas" to express a kind of love, which is far removed from the love we celebrate at Christmas, of God, giving up His home in Heaven, to come as His Son to live among us - Emmanuel.

If I was looking for something for a smidgen of truth, it might be towards the end, when she laments,

I thought you were here to stay

How can love be for a day?

This is the cultural confusion which our minds have to deal with, that takes Truth and distorts it just enough, to mislead us into believing the distorted version as truth; for example, Santa Claus is *supposed* to express the unselfish, generous love of God by distributing gifts to children, because he knows when they have been bad or good; so we believe God does the same! He punishes those who are bad and rewards those who are good! This is **SO FAR** removed from the truth about God!

Today, the fourth Sunday in Advent we shall continue to examine the two words, "Fear Not!", when it was spoken to the shepherds.

We spent three months this autumn examining "shepherds" and their significance in God's story. I am aware some of you have difficulty in accepting the shepherd as an inherently "good" person, preferring to believe instead, that the shepherd is fundamentally "bad", because his only interest in the sheep is, personal monetary benefit.

To believe this, would be the same as believing all humans are fundamentally bad, because the only thing we ever hear about them, is on the news, about them stealing from others, embezzling from the vulnerable, killing people to loot their personal valuables, or are intent on wiping out society; therefore **ALL** humans beings are inherently bad.

The profession of the shepherd existed long before human beings ate meat. Sheep were reared for their seasonal yield of wool, used in making

clothing and tents for people to live in. Perhaps, on a Thursday morning we might explore this subject in greater depth.

The focus of a good shepherd is his flock, providing for their physical needs, guiding them where they need to go, and keeping them safe from predators.

This is exactly what the shepherds were doing on the night in question. Having corralled them into a safe huddle for the night, shepherds, like soldiers in the military, took turns to keep watch while others slept.

Sometime in the darkest part of night, the night sky was ablaze with the glory of God, an expression which describes the presence of God.

Sometimes the presence of God appears as a cloud to shield us from the power of His presence, sometimes as burning fire, and sometimes as an extreme bright light,<sup>1</sup> which the shepherds witnessed (saw) that night.

We know from the revelation John had about Heaven, angels are engaged in continuous worship of God.<sup>2</sup> The Shepherds witnessed this magnificent worship: thousands of angels singing to the glory of God. One angel steps out to speak: "Fear Not! I bring you good news of great joy, that will be for all people - to you, this day, is born in the City of David (Bethlehem), a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord..."

The Angel reveals three titles: the first is *Saviour*, the second is *Christ* (Greek title for the Hebrew *Messiah*). Then, the astonishing announcement, which the shepherds most likely did not grasp at the time was, this Messiah, born as a baby, is also the Lord God, Himself!

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<sup>1</sup> (from ESV Study Bible) "cf Exodus 16:10; 24:27, 40:34; Ezekiel 1:28 and Revelation 21:23"

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 5:8-11; 5:13; 15:1-3;

The angel then provided the shepherds with evidence they needed to identify the special child in Bethlehem: of all the children born in Bethlehem that night, only one would be “wrapped in swaddling clothes (**and**) lying in a manger”! The shepherds found the Christ-child exactly as the angel said!

Most people, when asked, “who was the first evangelist, proclaiming the good news of God among us?”, would toss a coin between the apostles Paul and Peter, but the evidence we have before us today points to a very different group of people: the first evangelists of God’s good news of His presence on earth, were the shepherds. These men, are nameless in history, but they were the first to be drawn into the excitement of God’s work in redeeming us, to Himself. The shepherds were not as illiterate as we imagine them to be. They knew their scriptures and recognised God’s promise of a Saviour had come true; after all the declaration of His birth was made in the presence of God Himself.

The shepherds were so excited, they left their sheep, “went with haste” (as fast as they could), located Mary and Joseph, and saw for themselves, the special child, “wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger”, exactly as the angel told them.

They were so excited, they could not stop talking about the astounding way, Heaven was opened, and they were informed of the birth of “the Saviour, who is Christ (Messiah), the Lord God Himself”.

They were so excited, on their journey back to the hills where they left the sheep, they could not stop “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, **“exactly as it had been told them”<sup>3</sup>**. To everyone they

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:21

met on their way back (would have been at the crack of dawn when life begins and people start moving around), they said, **Guess what happened to us tonight!** These shepherds were the first evangelist, declaring the good news of God!

Over centuries, the learned and the wise poured over Holy Scripture to make sense and understand the pronouncements of the prophets, but God chose people *considered by society* to be illiterate and uneducated, whose profession makes them ceremonially unclean to worship at the Temple, God chooses these considered outcasts by society, to be the first to know His promise from old, was coming true before their very eyes!

We learn an important lesson from the shepherds: a true evangelist is not a person who knows all the answers; an evangelist is one who has experienced God in their own lives, and is not ashamed to share their experience!

Everyone is an evangelist, as long as each person is open to experience God, and when they do, are not ashamed to share the **experience of their personal encounter with God.**

To remind ourselves, the shepherds were not the only ones who were excited: Zechariah praised God when his ability to speak was returned to him; Mary could not wait to share the news with cousin Elisabeth, and in her presence, Mary burst into song praising God.

This Christmas, if you want to give your heart (and mind and soul) to someone special, someone who won't give it away or tear it apart the very next day (!), there is a special person waiting for you to get to know Him, to astound you with His presence, and reveal the secrets (mystery) of His words and promises.

The question is, are you ready for this experience? People don't usually come to faith in Christ because someone has answered all their questions; yes people want to know more, and asking questions is the way forward. Most people reach a point when they want to know, *is He real to you? Has He changed you for the better?* If He has, I want what you have!

Ultimately, it comes down to this: we've been entrusted with this wonderful message, that God wants us back with Him, and He is doing this through the person of His Son, the Christ. We are messengers of this news entrusted to us. **"Fear Not! The One who has given you life, will give you the opportunity and the boldness to share your experience."**

Are you ready for this experience?

**AMEN.**