

Our two readings remind us of the Christmas story we all know so well, but today I want us to look at the contrasts and the different contexts within it which may not be so obvious.

Firstly, there is a social context. Whilst the whole of the Roman Empire, including Joseph and Mary, is busy rushing around to comply with Augustus's census decree, the shepherds are quietly minding their own business, living in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night.

Like today's migrant workers or a new homeless family, I read about yesterday who now live in their car, they move from place to place largely unnoticed by officialdom. They are deemed to be, quite literally, not worth counting.

At the time, Shepherds in Israel had a reputation for being dishonest folk. They held virtually no status; were not allowed to testify in court, forbidden from holding any civic or judicial office. They were even prohibited from worshipping in the temple.

And yet it is these very same people that the angel speaks to. Religion has no place for them, society has no time for them. Yet, as the first to visit the manger, their presence flags up the ministry which Jesus will subsequently undertake with the poor, the marginalised and the outcast.

I imagine the sudden appearance of an angel and heavenly host was simultaneously the most terrifying and most wonderful moment of the shepherd's lives.

Yes, they were initially afraid, but they subsequently returned from the stable glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen. To me that echoes the chorus of our opening carol – *O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, O tidings of great comfort and joy*.

Then there is the appearance of the angels who give a spiritual context to the Christmas story. To the 1st century Jews, angels were believed to messengers and agents of God. One minute the shepherds are quietly minding their own business when the next sees the hillside ablaze with light and booming with the sound of heavenly chorus singing "Glory to God in the highest heaven".

Just imagine hearing the Halleluiah Chorus sung simultaneously by every choir in this country in perfect harmony. Then imagine it a million times better. Wouldn't you have sat up and taken note like the shepherds did? Rushing to the manger and then worshipping would have been a no brainer for them.

But two thousand years on, angels are looked on a little differently. Most likely we will recognise them as Christmas decorations. These angels were part of this year's Funchal Christmas lights.

When Hamza Yassin was awarded the trophy for winning this year's Strictly, he said of his professional dance partner Jowita "you are an angel disguised as a human being"

I know what he means – here's my personal angel!

Joking aside, I love the immediacy of how the shepherds respond to the angels.

It's very much how I tend to respond to situations. It's what is usually referred to as instinct or gut reaction.

But others, indeed like my own personal angel, respond differently. Their response is not what their emotion or gut tells them but what their head tells them. The wise men are a typical example of what I mean. This offers an intellectual context to the Christmas story.

They were truth seekers with little or no connection to Israel's culture or religion. It was their intellectual and scientific curiosity that led them to Jesus.

In marked contrast to the shepherds, they arrive after considerable planning some two years after Jesus's birth and again in contrast to the shepherds who came empty handed, they arrive bearing precious gifts.

Yet, interestingly, the wise men act instinctively too when they respond to a dream and do not return to Herod as he requested, but instead they leave the country secretly by a different route.

This set me wondering about how you came to know and love Jesus. Some of you would have done so immediately and instinctively whilst others will have done so only after a long thoughtful process. Both are equally valid.

But what is important is that having arrived at Jesus, you do not just stop there, but continue your journey of faith in the year ahead.

And one of the best ways is through making New Year resolutions – which is the easy part – and then sticking to them – that's the not so easy part.

Here are mine inspired by today's readings:

1. To speak words of hope and joy into the lives of those who are anxious – just as the angels did to the shepherds
2. Not to keep the good news of Jesus to myself but to share it – just as the shepherds did when they left the stable
3. To present Jesus with a precious gift – just as the wise men did

So, my New Year challenge to you is to be like Mary and treasure up all the things you have heard and ponder them in your heart and then put your faith into action once more.

And just in case I've worried you in these financially testing times – the final verse of our next carol shows us that the most precious gift of all is something each and every one of us already possesses.

Announce – In the bleak mid-winter

Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 1/1/23