

A friend of mine who is a nice guy, but a lousy pilot used to say, “it’s the journey not the destination that’s important”.

I was reminded of that when my young grandson asked me earlier today if Santa would still be coming because of the Omicron travel restrictions. I re-assured him he would, although I did noticed his father discreetly hung a mask and hand sanitizer in the fireplace.

Journeys. You’ve all heard the Christmas story many, many times. Just take a moment and with the person(s) you came with try to work out how many journeys are involved in Luke’s account of the Christmas story as they say on Strictly, in no particular order there was

1. Mary and Joseph’s journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem
2. The angel who comes from heaven to the shepherd fields outside Bethlehem
3. The heavenly host who subsequently join the angel
4. The shepherds who dash off to find the baby lying in a manger
5. Then their return journey back to their fields glorifying and praising God
6. And that doesn’t include the earlier two angelic visits to Mary & Joseph
7. Mary’s visit to her pregnant cousin Elizabeth
8. Nor the journey of the three so called wise men which I will be talking about next Sunday

Journeys. Did you get all of those? If you did, then you have my permission to tune out for a few moments. If you didn’t then let me raise just two questions because, as explorer Rich Ridgeway once said “The best journeys in life are those that answer questions you never thought to ask”

Question 1: Why was it that only shepherds were visited by the angels and why were they the first to be invited to see Jesus?

I think the announcement to the shepherds gives the story a social context. While the Roman Empire including Joseph and Mary, is rushing around to comply with Augustus’s census decree, the shepherds are quietly living in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night.

Like today’s migrant workers or the newly homeless families who live in their car, they move from place to place largely unnoticed by officialdom. They are deemed to be, quite literally, not worth counting.

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

And yet it is to these very people that the angel appears. 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.

Question 2: What about all the other people in and around Bethlehem, why didn’t they see or hear anything?

I think the angels gives the story a sound spiritual context. To the 1st century Jews, angels were believed to be messengers and agents of God. One minute the shepherds are quietly minding their own business when suddenly the hillside is ablaze with light and booming with the sound of a heavenly chorus singing “Glory to God in the highest heaven”. No wonder at first, they were afraid.

Just imagine hearing the Halleluiah Chorus sung simultaneously by every choir in this country in perfect harmony. Then imagine it a million times better and wouldn't you have sat up and taken note like the shepherds did?

So why didn't everyone else in Bethlehem hear the angels too?

Maybe it's because they were like we are so often with our minds focussed on the here and now, deaf and blind to any 'Glory to God in the highest'. Maybe the other people in Bethlehem were so wrapped up in other matters they simply didn't notice the angels.

Far-fetched? Look at this video clip I took two weeks ago in Madeira.

I was entranced with that 15-foot-tall angel hovering in front of Funchal Cathedral, yet everyone else literally walked past totally oblivious of the angel. They simply didn't notice.

It's like when we sing a carol or hymn which we have sung for most of our life; we know the words off by heart and on most occasions, we simply go blah blah then onto the next one.

BUT...sometimes, and I've experienced this and seen it happen with others, there is a 'je ne sais quoi moment', that moves us, that triggers the tears. Yet our partner or the people around us are totally oblivious to what is happening. That is what I imagine the journey in a spiritual context would be like.

And the spiritual context also enables us to consider our own faith. It has been said that the longest journey is the 12" or so between head and heart. I've travelled that journey, but it has taken me decades.....and it all started exactly 39 years ago to this very day..... on Christmas Eve 1982.

That was the occasion when I first stepped into this church with my faith firmly lodged in my head and the rest, as they say, is history and I now stand before you as an ordained minister.

My journey has taken 39 years since I first remember hearing that an angel said the baby is 'born to you'. Initially my head told me the message was for the shepherds; now my heart tells me it is for all who receive the message – that's me, and also you.

I don't know if what I've said will be received in your head or heart. But the message is the same as that told by the angels.

Don't be afraid. I really do bring glad tidings of great joy to you all.

Because as our Gospel reading confirmed: 'to you in David's town this day, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord has been born'.

Amen and Merry Christmas.

Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 24/12/21