

Christmas Day 2021

What does it take to drag us to a church service three days in a row? A sense of duty? A sense of loyalty? A sense of shame? Or even, possibly, a sense of joy - a sense of belonging, a sense of wanting to share, and also perhaps - a sense of need and love.

But suppose we knew nothing of Christmas? Just suppose it's just another cold December day and you're going to put the cows into the barn for the night. Once you've done that you need to get the tractor out of the frost or it won't start in the morning.

As you go to the lower field where you had left the tractor after you finished ploughing

for the winter wheat, you look up to the sky and think that Venus is particularly bright tonight - in fact, you've never seen it so bright...in fact, it isn't even Venus - it's a star you don't remember ever seeing before.

And it seems low in the sky, almost over the small village beyond the hill.

Perhaps you'll go and get a better view there after you've finished for the day, and ask if anyone else has seen this star before.

What is it that draws you? A sense of wonder? A sense of curiosity? A sense that maybe something has happened over the hill?

Luke tells us that shepherds were told by angels that something amazing had occurred

just over the hill, in the town of Bethlehem - a child had been born who would be the Messiah - the Anointed One.

Some of you may have come across a You Tube pastor from Virginia called Brandon Robbins. He is quite informative, and I take some of the following information from him, along with some personal research in which I checked his facts!

Shepherds - at the time of Jesus' birth - were no longer afforded the status that they had enjoyed before Israel was enslaved to Egypt. In Abraham's day it was an honourable profession to be a shepherd, and wealth was reckoned by the size of your flocks.

However, the Egyptians had two gods, Amun and Khum, to whom the ram was a sacred animal. Therefore to sacrifice a lamb would have been offensive to the Egyptians, so they looked down on the Israelites who raised their sheep for just such an end.

As a result, after years of bondage, the brainwashing wore off on the Israelites and shepherds lost their status, such that by the time of Jesus' birth, shepherds were regarded as scum.

They grazed their sheep wherever they felt like it, and that was not good for crops, as by now the Israelites had moved from being itinerant herders -which they had been at the

time of their move to Egypt - to crop-growers and farmers, who were now settled in the land of Canaan.

Robbins suggests - with some support - that shepherds were superior only to lepers in the social hierarchy, and were, as such, virtually untouchable, regarded as dirty and untrustworthy and on the lowest rung of the community ladder.

So there was great significance in the angels appearing to the shepherds; and there was great significance in their message. If we read the text of the Lukan account carefully, we find that not only did the angels tell the

shepherds where to find Jesus, but they reassured the shepherds that they would not feel out of place because Jesus was to be found in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes.

This meant that he was a not in the best hotel, attended by liveried lackeys, but rather like them - social outcasts, in a stable with critters for company - and even in swaddling clothes.

The last detail was significant to the shepherds, as the practice of swaddling the new-born lambs was done not only out of cleanliness, but also to prevent any blemish from spoiling the purity of the lamb presented for sacrifice.

So here was a Messiah - not of the military sort - but of lowly birth - even questionable parentage - and wrapped up, as it seemed, for sacrifice. The shepherds would have felt at home in these conditions, and even though regarded by society at large as dirt, here was something extraordinary to which they - the lowest of the low - could relate. No wonder they were amazed.

The significance of this invitation of the angels should not be lost on us today - even if you don't believe in angels (which I do - though I don't think I've seen a heavenly host singing to me - yet) - is that there really isn't any reason or excuse why you should back away or

refuse the invitation to come to Jesus. He doesn't stand on ceremony, so why should you?

He doesn't regard your status as beneath his dignity - so why should your way of life as a shifty dealer stop you? Looking at the shifty dealers that had a hand in Jesus' genealogy, you'd be hard put to claim you were less worthy than some of them!

Murderers, prostitutes, rapists, thieves, swindlers - to name just some of his predecessors; there's precious little value in claiming a 'holier-than-thou' attitude in the bible - it's just an anthology of 66 books chock-full of sex, violence, and crime! What

more could you ask for in your Christmas stocking for a good read?

I should perhaps add that reading it may change your life; at the very least it should stimulate your your brain to question, to dig deeper, to research, to hope and to believe.

We are lucky today, to have the Internet to help us in our quests for knowledge, but like any library of books, there will be some sources that are just plain wrong, and we need to be on our guard for these.

Only yesterday I told you 'Jenny's Story' - the beautiful young donkey who carried the

pregnant Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Few would dispute that the distance involved is around 90 miles, and would - at a slow walking pace - have taken about 4 days to complete.

But when I looked up the distance from Bethlehem to the Egyptian border, which is of interest to me because I wanted to know how long it would have taken the little family to escape the massacre of the Innocents, ordered by Herod the Great to kill all male children of two years and under, I found all sorts of rubbish.

Searching various so-called 'expert' sites on-line, I was faced with either believing that the

distance from Bethlehem to the Egyptian border was either around 40 miles via Gaza, or over 4,000 miles. One site had such an accurate measurement - 6489 km and 836.8 metres; yet another had 690 km as the answer.

I finally took refuge in an old map, looked at the scale - and simply measured it. The first one was right - about 40 miles.

That made the possibility of escaping the jurisdiction of Herod by donkey a reasonable possibility, and not something you would be hard pressed to do in less than a week in a Ferrari.

In this way, both our heads and our hearts should be challenged when we read the Christmas story.

No-one should ask you to swallow it whole; there are clearly authorship glosses in the gospel accounts, and we only have Matthew and Luke who even mention Jesus' birth. But we can attest that Jesus was born around that time and in that place.

The place - the old stable that Jenny remembered yesterday - has been ruined by centuries of 'improvements', which have been perpetrated upon it by arguing Christian sects, most notably the Greek Orthodox, the

Armenian Apostolic, and (of course) the Roman Catholic Churches.

Now it is called the Basilica of the Nativity, and is squashed in beside a monastery. It bears no resemblance to the cave stable of tradition as suggested in Luke's gospel, and by Origen of Alexandria.

I like to think that the only thing that might have been the same is the entrance, which is a very low portico in the rock, which you have to bend down to enter. It is called the Door of Humility because you must bow to enter.

Our faith, then, is a mix of fact and fiction; our job is to sort the one from the other -

rather like Jesus sorting out the sheep from the goats.

What we need is courage, dedication, and discernment.

If we don't have these attributes, we will probably give up on the Christmas story as too complicated - but worse still - we'll never make it to Easter, which is the whole point of Jesus coming in the first place.