

'Round John Virgin' illustration! Dec.20th today -just 5 sleeps till Santa! And some here may not wish to be reminded of that - because there's so much 'to do' on the Christmas 'to do' list before the big day. Presents still to buy (!), wrap – or find where you hid them 6 months ago > food & drink to be bought, relations to collect (or deliver out of the way!) > parties to organise > decorations still hang – including finding some spare bulbs for the light that won't work > the tree to stuff & the turkey to decorate...! Christmas means a lot of 'doing', doesn't it?

I am a product of King Edward VI Grammar School Stourbridge, Worcs -as it was then back in the 60s (1960s). And being a Grammar school, we learnt 'Grammar' - English Grammar & also Latin, French, German & Spanish in due course (+ NT Greek as part of Ministerial training aged 40!).. So I belong to the generation who knows its nouns from its adjectives, understands that apostrophe s is not the same as plural s & who can spot a relative pronoun at 50 paces! And before this turns into another Meldrew like rant about 'what do they teach them these days' – ON to the shepherds, because I want to highlight **7 verbs** associated with them – **7 things that they did** here in this so familiar bit of Luke 2.

They WATCHED (2v8) – ***'keeping watch over their flocks by night'*** is one of those Bible phrases that resonate down the years at this season. And let's not spoil that image with smart Alec references to the fact that, if it was midwinter, even in Bethlehem, the sheep would probably not have been on the hills outside the town, but safely tucked up indoors somewhere.

What's important theologically here in the Birth narratives of Luke & Matthew is the announcement of Good News – not by megaphone, but by messengers from God. And to whom this Good News is first told.

'An everyday story of country folk' how the Archers used to be introduced on the BBC Home Service (showing my age again). ..Not that I ever listen to the Archers of course! 2

I suppose what makes some plot lines work (**cf all 'Soaps'**) is that we, the listener/viewer know the truth, but the central characters go to great lengths to conceal the truth. Here in Luke 2 the greatest news ever is announced first to shepherds – ordinary people are let in on the truth. And they are WATCHING their flocks by night, yes, but also alert to God's message for them & the world that night.

'Seek the Lord while he may be found, call on him while he is near. Is.55. 'Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.' A quote from that apocalyptic Advent passage of Jesus in Matthew 24. *'Your death, O Lord, we commemorate...'* Final Coming will happen, yes, but until then, you & I are called to 'watch'. In light, in darkness, in joy & in sorrow, the Lord comes & we need to be watchful & aware of his presence. Here in midst of our worship > in our places of work (reminder from Mark Green H/S does not say at factory gates 'whoops – place of work see you at 5 p.m.!') Yes, in one sense, Advent is a perpetual season, because, if we are watchful & mindful of his coming, the Advent Lord is present in midst of his Advent people.

They FEARED (v9) – *"Fear not' said he, for mighty dread had seized their troubled mind..."* Just imagine you're walking the dog round Stowe Pool on Thursday, Christmas Eve – after dark. There you are & an angel in the Shekinah glow of glory of God appears before you. What would be your reaction? Whip out your smart phone & take an image to share on facebook? Status: 'just met an angel' – how many 'likes'??

No, I guess most of us might just be a tad scared. After all, the phrase ***'Do not be afraid'*** occurs 365 times (apparently) in the Bible – one for each day of the year.

There are a lot of things that frighten us, or at least cause us to be anxious, in life – the future, the past, our children, our parents, our health, our work, the state of the world...

But 'fear of the Lord' by & large would not register very high up on people's lists for 2015. And yet (**Proverbs 1**) '**fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge/wisdom**'. If we live in an age that has lost **respect** for authority (more Meldrew!), then we certainly live in a time when 'fear' i.e. respect for God at Christmas or any other time of year is fairly none existent.

So we, gathered for worship on the brink of another Christmas, have this opportunity this morning to show 'fear for the Lord' in this 9 a.m. Service. First of three different Christmas services today – no two are the same. There is something profoundly simple & yet equally moving in seeing very young children act out the Nativity – which is more than just the 'Ahh!' factor.

I used to enjoy all the interaction with the children, their toys etc. But I am also glad that Ian gave me the opportunity to lead this service in our schedule – a quiet, reflective 9 a.m. service just 5 days before Christmas. In it we can emphasise the reverence & awe of God coming among us again..

Together we can ponder the Incarnation - of God living in human flesh – pause amidst all the seasonal fun outside & inside church.

They HEARD (vv 10,11,14) – first they hear the announcement of the Saviour's birth. God makes himself known to these ordinary people- and he's gone on doing that for 2000 years. Making himself known to ordinary people, bursting into their lives and changing them forever. They heard directions on how to find the Saviour.

Don't forget Bethlehem was packed that night (no room at the inn & all that) – it was full of David's descendants come up to town to register for the Roman census. There would have been other births that night in Bethlehem, but only one was to be found lying in a manger.

That was their sign- so what is ours? How do we find this Saviour in the midst of our own overcrowded lives? Here in this building 5 days before Christmas is as good a starting place as any.

And these shepherds also heard the eternal worship of heaven – a privilege not given to many, true enough, but each time we come together for worship here, so our worship is joined to that of heaven as well. Maybe, just maybe we catch/hear something of all that, in midst of our songs & prayers here. It's good to come together just 5 days before THE day – into this sanctuary – a holy place. Okay, so we are bit short on vaulted ceilings & flying buttresses. No huge nave & transept – just our own intimate, familiar place of worship – a place where, down the decades, Jesus Christ born that man no more may die, has been preached & encountered by men & women who have sought him.

They WENT (vv 15 &16) – note the shepherds reaction. They could have said: *'That's nice, I wonder what's on telly.'* They could have said, *'That's great, let's pop round to the off licence & buy a bottle to wet the baby's head'*. But instead they said, **'Let's GO & experience this amazing event for ourselves.'** The call of God in Jesus Christ is a call to an ACTIVE response & service for him.

Whenever we come together here, there is a Call to Worship, acting as an invitation to be engaged in the reality & activity of God & to respond to him. The response of the shepherds here is to go & see for themselves ***'this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'***

Do we do that? Actually make a response which involves us⁵ doing something about it. It's possible to turn up here week by week & yet keep the Lord at arm's length, as it were. The shepherds wanted a 1st hand experience of God living amongst them – to see the Incarnate Son of God for themselves & to know the difference that would make to their lives from then on.

...End of Part 1

They FOUND ‘- *seek & you will find...*’ said Jesus in Sermon on Mount. The shepherds did just that & they found their Messiah in humble surroundings. Even if the ‘stable’ was in fact a ‘guest room’, still hardly the most splendid of birthplaces for the King of kings. Temple sheep were reared in fields around Bethlehem. So maybe these shepherds were rearing sheep for sacrifices in the Temple. Now they go to see the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world – the One who would pay the ultimate sacrifice.

It's only when we are prepared to ‘go’ to find God that we will find him & then maybe also be surprised by him & how he can work great things through us individually & together...

They TOLD – and having found this new King, what did the shepherds do next? **QUOTE v17** – these folk who had been the first in the NT to be ‘evangelised’ become instant evangelists themselves. ‘***Hark the herald angels sing...***’ Christmas is about communication. ‘***Sing through all Jerusalem, Christ is born in Bethlehem***’. The familiar lines of our carols remind us that this is the season for spreading the news of birth of Saviour of the world. Let's pray that for at least ONE of our visitors to our Christmas services, that the telling of the birth of Jesus may really strike home – maybe for the first time in someone's life.

[I can still recall how I felt, reading John 1 vv1-14 at a children's carol service & realising for the 1st time in my life properly – that here was Good News for ME & that I need to make some response.]

It's not just about watching the children 'perform', not just **6** about singing familiar Christmas carols, not just about the 'magic & sparkle'. '**Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.**' That's what/WHO it's all about. News to be heard, received, passed on & lived out in changed lives.

They WORSHIPPED (v20) - '*Lost in wonder, love & praise*', runs the line of the hymn. But this season of Christmas is the season of wonder & I don't mean that some of us here may be at the stage of thinking 'I wonder why we have Christmas at all!'

And, of course, it's stating the seasonal obvious for preachers when we recognise that the world has 'hi-jacked' the sense of wonder at Christmas. Have you noticed how increasingly popular external Christmas lights on houses are becoming in recent years? – some streets like Blackpool illuminations, including Bracken Close & no.1!. Because I rather like it – all those lights twinkling, shining out – light in darkness.

And yes, some of it is a bit tacky & over the top – but light shining in darkness also attract. '**The people walking in darkness have seen a great light...**'

'What do you want from Lidl' text! 'Every Lidl thing..' Cf 'lidl thing' that shepherds found lying the the manger...

Those shepherds outside Bethlehem that night, as recorded in Luke 2, saw a great light – their darkness was ended. Lives changed forever...

So they **WATCHED > FEARED > HEARD > WENT > FOUND > TOLD & WORSHIPPED.**

In the midst of all our own 'doing' in the coming hours, may each one of us find the time & space to include at least some of these as well.