

Duddington Church Benefice Service

Sunday 1st January 2017.

Simplicity.

At the start of the coalition government in May 2010 David Cameron together with Nick Clegg and the Chancellor George Osborne decided to walk from Downing Street to The Commons – a distance of at least half a mile. The attempt was well intentioned but after a very few days the Security Services prevailed upon them to stop the experiment and take the armour plated Jaguar instead. It may have been a stunt but it certainly backfired. The gap between high profile politicians and the public was just too wide.

Similarly any visit of Her Majesty the Queen also takes huge preparation on the part of the security services – as I know to my own cost. Once you know that The Queen is coming there will be at least 18 months of high level meetings involving the palace, the police and the local authority – all expressing their own particular concerns.

These examples are in direct contrast to the Incarnation of God in the form of a small baby in a humble stable which we celebrate at this Christmas-tide. No fuss, no security arrangements, no protocol. Life in those days was precarious and this was a significant risk from a power which we believe to be omniscient. There was little of competence about this birth in a stable so it is not surprising that few people noticed. Only later did this unique life catch the attention of others, some of whom read back into the story miraculous signs and wonders.

The Shepherds

It was the shepherds that noticed and went out of their way.

Since I came to live among you I have learned very quickly how hard shepherds work. I'm not sure how they managed to arrange a day off. I do know that they have to carefully plan their hospital visits in order that the sheep or their dogs are not interrupted.

Now I have a particular interest in shepherds and their style of life. If any of you have ever had the opportunity to attend an ordination services at some great cathedral you will realize that clergy are to model their lives on Jesus, The Good Shepherd. The bishop declares,

*'The Priest must set the Good Shepherd always before him
as the pattern of his calling, caring for the people committed
to his charge and joining with them in a common witness to the world'.*

The life-style of the Rutland shepherd is extremely demanding. Indeed, they are working today and have been doing every day whilst other members of the farming community have been enjoying a well-earned rest. The NT shepherds were like today's Sunday traders. They were unorthodox; they couldn't keep to the strict rules of their religion. So they were seen as outcasts and yet it was to those very outcasts that the baby Jesus was first revealed!

There is something here which speaks directly to our community in Duddington today in its dark and tragic circumstances. In the deepest part of the night, when time hangs heavy and sleep is impossible the angels gather and lead us to the source of light and life.

The Naming of Jesus.

In the pub at Barrowden they are running a sweepstake on the Landlord's daughter's baby: when it will arrive and what the weight might be. But there is no such sweepstake on the baby's name: that was decided by the mother some time ago and has been well and truly shared.

In the birth narratives of Jesus, Mary had known the name of her son for some time. In this regard, she is like any other mother who has had to live at close quarters to this precious bundle for 9 months. It had been revealed to her by family members. His name was to be Jesus, which in Aramaic – the spoken language – was Joshua, meaning 'Saviour'.

Here was the source of hope for all – and a most unlikely source it was too, issuing from a small baby soon to be a migrant. The Jews were waiting for a big personality to mobilize public opinion and create a mutiny to drive out the occupying Roman forces. The authority vested in this baby could not be further from that vain hope.

The novelist Morris West in his book, *'The Shoes of the Fisherman'*, wrote about a Russian who was elected pope quite unexpectedly. It was as much a shock to Kirill as it was to the rest of the papal court. On the night before his consecration as pope, Kirill dressed himself in his humble clerical gear and sneaked out of the Vatican unnoticed to experience something of the ordinary life of the people of Rome to whom he had been called to minister. He sat down at a café table, ordered a coffee and started to relax until he needed to pay. He had no money. The proprietor was quickly losing his temper until the folk on the next table offered to pay for this poor priest's drink. They didn't believe that him when he professed to be the pope.

This is the surprise which we celebrate at Christmas: good news for all people, but especially those who are least expecting it: those who are on the margins of society; those who have given up on organized religion; those who have had hope squeezed out of them and to the shocked and agonized of Duddington. To them the angels call. Amen.