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Two more sleeps to Christmas! Anyone remember Andy Williams or Johnny Mathis singing the classic Christmas song, *It's the most wonderful time of the year*? The first line describes Christmas as it should be, "...a most wonderful time of the year!" The lines which follow, in **my** biased opinion, spoils it:

*With the kids **jingle-belling**, And everyone telling you, Be of good cheer...*

*There'll be much **mistle-toeing**, And hearts will be glowing, When loved ones are near...*

On the occasion of the season, I think we can forgive our American cousins who relish changing *nouns* into *verbs*.

For as many years as I can remember, popular culture has without any effort, distorted the significance of the birth of Christ. I have nothing against Bob Geldorf; I think he does some great stuff, but in 1984, at the top of the Christmas charts was his composition, ***Do They Know It's Christmastime at all?*** My spontaneous response at the time was, *Bob, **they** know more about Christmas than you do! **They** could teach you more about Christmas than you could sing to them!*

I also felt the song was very culturally insensitive:

There won't be snow in Africa this Christmastime; (Africa is a continent, not a country and Mount Kilimanjaro has snow all year around!) ... Where nothing ever grows, No rain nor rivers flow - Do they know it's Christmastime at all? Here's to you - Raise a glass for everyone.

The words which upset me were, *Where the only water flowing - Is the bitter sting of tears - And the Christmas bells that ring there, are the clanging chimes of doom - Well, tonight thank God it's them instead of you.* Tell me I am reading it wrong, and I will change my mind.

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In our attempt to communicate with our generation, we tend to stretch the imagination to accept untruth as truth

Over the past three Sundays, we have examined the golden thread of worship running through the lives of the priest Zechariah who worshipped in *awestruck silence*, Mary who worshipped in *childlike innocence*, and Joseph who worshipped in *obedience, with humility* as he submitted and surrendered to God his worries and concerns, and did exactly as God instructed Him.

At the time of Jesus' birth, the Jewish nation had not heard from God for 400 years. The last prophetic voice was that of Malachi (last book in the Old Testament) who ends with the message from God, *See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way of the Lord¹*. The Angel Gabriel breaks silence from where Malachi left off 400 years prior, informing Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, that the time had arrived, for God to set into motion His ultimate act of love, of redeeming His creation back to Himself.

Today we go ahead of the story to examine the lives of Shepherds, another group of people who have been described in different ways.

People came from all over to worship God at the Temple in Jerusalem. Part of their worship was to give alms to the poor (they gave to the poor themselves, not through charitable institutions), and also to make an appropriate sacrifice, as fitting their financial circumstances, for God to be merciful towards sin, and for many, an act seeking God's forgiveness for their own sin.

Jerusalem and Bethlehem are like twin cities, less than 10 kms apart. The hills around Bethlehem were suitable for sheep grazing. While not stated in the text, some have suggested, the business of breeding sheep in the hills around Bethlehem was for the purpose of Temple sacrifice. It **might**

¹ Malachi 3:1

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be true, but it might be just as absurd as assuming, the vineyards in Kent produce wine for communion exclusively for worship services held at Westminster Abbey or Westminster Cathedral.

It is also quite likely that Joseph and Mary travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem when she was in her final trimester of pregnancy. We don't know how long they stayed in Bethlehem before Jesus was born. We do know from Luke 2:7, when they arrived, because of the snap call for a census, accommodation was nigh impossible, even at the local inn, which would have been a last resort for travellers, but only if they did not have family.

There is no reference to a heartless inn keeper who turned away, journey-weary Joseph and Mary, then had a turn of heart and showed them the cattle stalls at the back of the inn where Joseph, a carpenter, fashioned a crib, and then Mary **quietly** gave birth to baby Jesus. The human imagination does get carried away and runs wild with detail, if only to authenticate the narrative to make it believable!

We know two things for certain: Luke states that Joseph felt compelled to go to Bethlehem "*because he belonged to House of David*". Based on this, scholars have noted, Joseph would have had relatives living in the area, and it would have been natural for him to seek shelter with them.

Kenneth Bailey, a well respected Middle Eastern scholar writes, "*How could a Jewish town fail to help a young Jewish mother about to give birth?*"², such was the strength of social custom and community bonding.

We also know for certain, the night Jesus was born, all Heaven rejoiced that God's plan of redemption and salvation was set into motion. This special baby, safely delivered by an obedient mother, in the care of a doting father, was every reason for Heaven to celebrate.

² "Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes" by Kenneth E. Bailey (IVP.2008) p.28

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We also know for certain that joy in Heaven was so great, it could not be contained; it was so great, Heaven's joy burst open upon a group of unsuspecting shepherds, watching their sheep at night, on the hills surrounding Bethlehem.

This background is necessary for us appreciate The Shepherds and their response.

The first thing Luke tells us is that the shepherds were **living** out in the fields **nearby**, keeping watch over their flocks by night. It might have been the lambing season, or it might have been just before the Passover when the demand for lambs would be high, so the shepherds are **living** out in the fields to protect their livelihood.

What happened next would have frightened even the most brave. We associate **the glory of the Lord** as a supernatural light. This is true, but **the glory of the Lord** is not just a super bright light!

In Genesis we learn, God created us in His image. As a mirror reflects our image back to us, God created us in His image to reflect His glory; that when God sees us, He sees Himself in us. **Glory**, like many words, is difficult to explain.

The glory of God is the beauty and excellence of all His many perfections, His infinite and overflowing completeness of all that is good, all that is life-giving and life sustaining. Perhaps in the new year we might spend time learning more about the glory of God.

God in all His perfectness and completeness, accompanies the Herald Angel as we read, *An Angel of the Lord appeared to (the Shepherds) and the glory of the Lord shone all around, and they (the Shepherds) were terrified!*³

During this time, the Angel Gabriel delivers messages unique to each individual. He tells Mary that the child to be born was in fulfilment of

³ Luke 2:9

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prophecy; Gabriel answers Joseph's question saying the baby is conceived by the Holy Spirit, and now to the Shepherds, the Angel refers to the baby by His mission, *He is the Chosen One who will save!* God communicates with each of us with messages which are unique to our understanding and our circumstances.

When the *angel-armies of heaven* declare the glory of God, they are reflecting the completeness of God's perfection, *Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace to all people on whom His favour rests.*

Heaven recedes back to itself. The exceedingly bright light fades away; the stunned shepherds regain their composure and decide to, *"go to Bethlehem as fast as possible, to see for ourselves what **the LORD has revealed to us!**"* - not what the angel said, but what **the LORD God revealed!** The Shepherds knew whom they heard!

In Zechariah we saw worship in **Awesome Silence**; now the Shepherds teach us to worship in **Awestruck Praise!**

In the early hours before dawn, a noisy band of shepherds hurry down into Bethlehem, running from house to house until they finally find the baby lying in a cattle manger. They are **AWESTRUCK!**

The shepherds witnessed the word of God made real! They cannot contain their discovery to themselves. As they return to their flocks of sheep, they glorify God and praise Him for all the things they had heard and seen, **which was just as they had been told!**

Worship in **Awesome Praise** is contagious!

We often think we have to evangelise, talk about God and Jesus to other people, but read what happens. *Seeing was believing. When the shepherds had seen Jesus, they told everyone they met, what the angels had said about this child and whoever heard the shepherds' story were in awe of what they heard.*

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May this example of the Shepherds cause us to consider what we say to others about Christmas, and how their understanding is shaped by our words!

As we bring to a close, this season of Advent, this should be our worship, of speaking about our understanding of Christmas and our experience of God. God takes care of the rest as long as we are faithful to the Truth!

AMEN