



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

Christmas Day – Mass at Dawn

The Shepherds were first

Readings: Isaiah 62: 11-12, Ps 96, Titus 3: 4-7, Luke 2: 15-20

I have noticed, over recent years, that the season of Christmas and Epiphany have blended so seamlessly into one another in the public imagination that our gallery of Christmas cards has undergone a seismic shift. These days gorgeously attired Magi vastly outnumber scruffy shepherds. Camel borne, richly turbaned, immaculately groomed, trailing glory in their wake, these elegant seers, eyes uplifted to the heavens, attuned to the cosmic mysteries of the universal night sky, trained on the trailing comet, faces lined with serious intent, are clearly fixed on a higher purpose some way off, yet to be realised.

It is an image that fires the imagination and clearly resonates with us. Perhaps we identify more readily with the sophisticated, well heeled, well dressed, well fed, much travelled cosmopolitan elite and their endless intellectual enquiry and the relative riches of such a culture.

After all we have more in common with the Magi than with the shepherds and theirs is a beautiful and terrifying story, part of God's wonderful revelation and the opening of the salvation road to the Gentiles.

So I do not complain about the Wise Men cards but I miss the shepherds. They, after all, were the first. They were the ones who turned up at Christmas.

It may be that we've got a bit blasé about it. Tired by years of sitting through 'tea towel and tinsel' nativities where a group of fidgety boys in old dressing gowns and unwelcome millinery sit embarrassedly holding some old stuffed toy that a sentimental and well meaning mother has stuffed under their arms in a futile effort at verisimilitude.

It may be that we see no reflection of ourselves in these representatives of the rural poor or the ancient agrarian societies which they represent.

It matters not. The shepherds are there and that is no accident. They are there first and that is providential.

Throughout the history of God's involvement with His chosen people, shepherding has been the key. At the height of their fame their king was a boy whom God had taken from among the sheepfolds, David. Shepherding was intended to be the model for the monarchy.

In the darkest despair of their defeats, when king, prophet and priest had failed, God declared Himself to be the Shepherd of Israel, a central truth recognised in that great Psalm that often accompanies the Christian dead to their place of burial. 'The Lord is my Shepherd'. So when God descends to Man in the Christ child it is entirely right that his first visitors, admirers, companions should be those whose ministry most clearly reflects His.

Their task, over the long years, and in the hidden centuries of their forebears, has been to watch over their flocks, to defend them from the prowling predator, to lead them into good pasture, to rescue the lost and foolish stray, to tend the wounds and to bring them safe home to the fold.

That is why Christ came – to be the Good Shepherd. Those are the very tasks our shepherd king takes upon Himself and thus upon His Church. It is the selfsame job description that is one of the most beautiful of the Papal titles, Pastor Pastorum, shepherd of the shepherds. For, wherever the Church is, there is the Pastoral work of Christ. And that work cannot be done other than among the flock. It is why Pope Francis uttered that pithy reminder, ‘The shepherd should smell of the sheep’.

So let us, for a moment, dwell with them on the hilltop over Bethlehem. Let us recall that extraordinary moment when, in the starlit winter sky a messenger of God appeared to these lowly unconsidered men and gave them the news that would alter the destiny of Man.

We are privileged to hear these holy words every time we read the Gospels. Let us kneel with those shepherds as the sky is filled with the glory of the whole company of Heaven praising God - for that is what we do every time we come to Mass. From the Gloria to the Sanctus we raise our voices and our hearts to join the Angelic chorus before the throne of grace.

And let us, with them, come to adore Jesus and receive Him in the Holy Sacrament of the altar as the Lord of Lords and God of Gods places Himself in our hands and in our hearts.

And finally, with amazed and thankful hearts, let us remember what the shepherds did next, St. Luke tells us, *'They made known the word that had been spoken to them and people were astonished at what the shepherds told them.'*

In short, the shepherds were the first to preach the Good News. They were the first evangelists.

Like the shepherds we know the truth. We have beheld His Glory. We know who Jesus is.

The last act of the Mass is to send us out into the world to share that truth.

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