

Midnight Mass Homily 2021

Bishop of Chichester

Chichester Cathedral

Christmas makes us remember things. Even as a child, I used to remember the conventions of Christmas, in the domestic rituals of putting up the tree, exchange of presents, and allocation of washing-up duties different from any other day. So I make no apology for telling you that this Christmas I've found myself remembering people who were formative figures in my youth – among them Bert and Dorothy.

Bert was an enthusiastic but inexpert organist (the deputy at our church); Dorothy was in charge of the small, cheerful and chaotic Sunday School. They were not married to each other but went on holiday together (separate rooms), which always amazed me because at church they never stopped bickering, perhaps a bit like a married couple.

Bert was keen on reading up about everything. Dorothy was intelligently dreamy. Bert was peppery and used to say to Dorothy, "You never look at anything properly: all you do is gawp!" Dorothy used to say, "I like to take my time, Bert, and I see things you always miss."

The refrain of tonight's celebration is simply this: "What did you see?" And of course, there are different ways of seeing things: Bert's check list, or Dorothy's leisurely musing.

On this night, for well over 1200 years, the Church has posed this question in its early morning service: "Shepherds, tell us, who did you see? Who has appeared on earth?" And the shepherds reply, "We have seen the new-born child and we have heard the choirs of angels praising the Lord."

Obviously, there are no shepherds actually present at that service, this is simply a way of bringing alive the fact that on this night a baby has been born and we want to be reminded by the first visitors to the stable why it is such a special birth.

Now if the shepherds were of a factual turn of mind, like Bert, they would have quite a lot to say about the importance of shepherds in all this.

They would point out that Bethlehem is the City of David, the great King of Israel, who conquered nations, spectacularly broke the law of God, and spectacularly repented. This was the man who wept at the death of his traitor son, Absalom, but who was succeeded by Solomon, the great and wise king who built the temple in Jerusalem, the centre of the whole world. (Old maps always showed Jerusalem as the centre of the world).

And then, the shepherds would say, with a reasonable degree of pride, “And of course, David was a shepherd, originally, you know.” And that’s the point.

David, was the youngest son, out looking after sheep when the prophet Samuel came looking for a new king. David’s older brothers were all considered – he was not, too young, and no experience. But God inspired Samuel to press the search further, David was found and anointed as the chosen heir.

This is not just shepherd propaganda. It is the record of scripture that God repeatedly overturns human expectations, chooses unlikely people, and models a new and subversive way of revealing power, truth and love.

Throughout the Old Testament, God is thought of as the Shepherd of his people, Israel, the one who feeds and guides them, who keeps them safe, who gives them the rule of law and holiness. David combines these roles, as a Shepherd-king. In doing this he paves the way for us to understand who Jesus is and how natural it will be for him, when he grows up to say, “I am the good Shepherd; the good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

So the Shepherds of a factual turn of mind, like Bert, are right to remind us it is no accident that Jesus is born in Bethlehem, that he will fulfil the hopes and promises set to music and words of incomparable beauty in the Psalms of David his ancestor through Joseph, Mary's husband. And to this day, in the Church of England, we still use the language of being a shepherd to describe the priests of the Church, and we call its members the flock, which Jesus commanded St Peter to feed and care for.

But other shepherds are less like Bert, though they are musical and of an artistic persuasion. Their account of the birth draws on the imagination, though it is still robust in its implications, and I think Dorothy would probably find their approach one that she understood a bit better.

These are the shepherds who focus more on the mystery of the angels and the power of their message. How do you describe a vision of angels? A description of wings and tinsel for the halo is absolutely fine for the school nativity play, but there is more that needs to be said. A French 16<sup>th</sup> century carol describes it well: it is like a sweet fragrance "stealing our senses all away".

We have commodified fragrances under very marketable names that will smell the same wherever you buy them. But, these shepherds would observe, in the Bible the theme of a fragrance that reduces you to silence and amazement is one of the ways of describing the presence of God. Indeed, at the dedication of the Temple, the cloud that filled the temple was so overpowering in the impact that it made on all the senses, especially that of smell, that the priests simply had to be silent and still.

That, say these visionary, thoughtful shepherds, is what we experienced when the angels surrounded us and, again, when we got to the stable. We don't know how else to put it into words. It was something money cannot buy and you cannot replicate.

And those shepherds are right. The sense of smell arrests us powerfully. We speak sombrely of the stench of corruption the aroma of death and we know that one sign of our damage to the earth is the bad smell that pollution makes and the badness of its consequences in every part of the created order.

By contrast, our fascination with aromatherapy suggests that a new moral code for global living can enable us to breath a different air and a better life, drawing from the presence of God a fragrance which is unique, exquisite, beyond human words or manufacture, which stimulates a vast structure of recollection, enabling us to say, when we look into the crib, “Oh yes, I remember, now: this vision of a new-born child, the most beautiful gift of life that God has to give – this is Christmas, this is Jesus Christ who lives and dies so that I can die and live. This is an unimaginable fragrance, this is the scent of heaven, this is beauty and justice on earth.”

Well, Dorothy would love that. Bert would want to get on with the next thing, and so must we. I hope that however you choose to describe it, the sensation of your encounter with the living God, Jesus Christ, born in a stable, will remain with you throughout the year ahead, and that you will have had a very happy Christmas indeed.