

IMPORTANT DETAILS IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY

Shepherds

“There were in the same district, staying out in the fields, watching over their flocks by night.”

We should not be misled by the lovely classical picture of the Lord as the shepherd in Psalm 23. Nor by the practice of oriental kings to refer to themselves as the shepherds of their people. In fact, the Latin translation of Psalm 23:1 as “The Lord rules me” probably prevented Psalm 23 from being as popular during early and medieval times as in more recent English-speaking countries.

When the time of the New Testament came, shepherds were not highly thought of. They were listed by self-righteous Jews together with tax collectors, prostitutes, and others as people who had dishonest occupations. They used the term “sinners” for people like them who were considered as disreputable. Shepherds usually did not own their own sheep, but worked for pay, like the “hirelings” Jesus refers to in John 10, who ran away when the wolf came. It was expected that when they were over the horizon they would help themselves to milk, wool, skins, and meat, and pasture the flocks on land where they were not supposed to be.

How like Jesus himself, who used the picture of the good shepherd to describe Himself, and the picture of the shepherd going after the lost sheep, and who gloried in the charge that He was the friend of tax collectors and “sinners”!

The shepherds knew very well that they were sinners, not just in the social sense of having disreputable occupations. They would have been particularly aware of it when the light of God’s splendour shone around them. That is why they were very afraid. Sinful people expect to die when they see God or an angel, or the Lord’s glory. For, as Paul wrote, “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”

When the greatest event of all time, the entry of God’s Son into this world, the news was not broken to the mayor of Bethlehem, still less to the chief priest at Jerusalem, but to people who were regarded as disreputable. There had been nothing grand about the Son’s entry into this world, born not only weak and small, but also laid in a manger, and without impressive fanfare among the great and significant people of this world. The Son of Man had come to seek and to save what was lost! He came to take on human nature, that He might save sinful human nature. All sinful people have to ask is whether they are sinners, and then they can know for certain that the Son of God has come to save them!

The Lord

“... Because a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord, has been born for you today, in the city of David.”

That word “today” must have struck those shepherds with awe. After all those long years of waiting, when many people in Judah were no longer really looking for the consolation of Israel. This was it! God had at last acted.

In all the prophecies, the word “Saviour” had not, or at least rarely, been used for the promised Deliverer. Yet the content of His work had been clearly expressed in various other ways, such as “crush the head of the serpent”, and “God will justify many through His righteous Servant.” The noun “Saviour” had already been foreshadowed when the angel of the Lord told Joseph to name Mary’s child “Jesus”, because “Jesus”, the Greek form of the later Hebrew name “Jeshua”, itself carried the same meaning as “Joshua”, which means “The LORD saves.” The angel told Joseph, “For He will _ His people from their sins.” Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary led her to say, “My spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.”

God’s work of salvation is expressed in several major ways in the New Testament. One is in terms of the forgiveness of sins. Another is the obverse of that, that God counts the persons who believe in Jesus as righteous. That is “justification.” Another is reconciliation, the removal of God’s wrath or hostility. That is expressed in the angel’s phrase, “Peace on earth.” Another is becoming God’s children, either by adoption, or through rebirth. Just about everybody thinks that he can cope with a baby. This baby is no ordinary baby, though He is a complete human being, like us. The only way we can cope with this baby is to acknowledge our need for forgiveness of sin, our need for reconciliation, our need to be transferred from the family of Satan to the family of God.

However, two words must have struck those shepherds with particular force: “Christ”, and “Lord.” “Christ” means “the Anointed One”, the Messiah. Isaiah had referred to Him as the One on whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest. Many in Israel were expected a mighty prince, a political Messiah, and, again, the shepherds must have wondered what kind of Messiah this baby was going to be, if he was to be found lying in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, with the news broken to them, shepherds! Later in this same chapter, Luke 2,

Simeon is said to have been waiting to see the Lord's "Christ" before he died. Strange that shepherds should have been given the privilege of seeing Him ahead of such a person!

The word "Lord" has been used twice before in this account. They were phrases where the Old Testament used the incommunicable name of God Himself, in Hebrew "YHWH": "the angel of the LORD", and "the glory of the LORD." The Jehovah's Witnesses translation of the Bible uses "Jehovah God" in both these phrases in Luke chapter two. However, they balk at using it the third time, in the same context, though the Greek word *kyrios*, each time without the definite article, as the Septuagint regularly handled YHWH. The third time they simply translated "the Lord", not "Jehovah God." If "Jehovah God" was acceptable the first two times, why not also the third time? They have cooked the books! The truth is that this baby is very God himself, not identical with the Father, but with the Father from eternity, and like the Father, fully God, and one God with Him. It is He who has become flesh. It is He who is the Saviour. That is why our salvation is secure and certain. That is why any thought that we have to contribute towards the salvation that He has fully accomplished for us is an insult to Him.

What does it mean that this baby is the Lord? It means that God is man, and this man is God. I_ means all kinds of contradictions: that He who never had a beginning has beginning and a birthday! He who 'is all-powerful is weak! He who is rich is poor. It includes the kinds of paradoxes that some Christmas hymns express that He whom the world cannot enclose reposes in Mary's arms. It means that the majestic and glorious Lord of all is weak and poor and small, and makes His bed where cattle lately fed!

The contradictions open the way for the glorious paradox that Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* concludes with the Lenten melody "O sacred head now wounded", but in a major key, with trumpets blaring in joyful acclamation! Bach knew what he was doing. For, as the Nicene Creed puts it, His incarnation was "for us men and for our salvation."

Then there are the words "for you." Grammarians call this "a dative of advantage." It means, "to benefit you." This makes the angel's announcement to the shepherds good news. Good news in which a person can participate is really good news. When Martin Luther commented in the Small Catechism on the words "for you" in the Lord's supper, he made the comment, "For the words 'for you' require simply a believing heart." It is the same with the birth of Jesus, the Saviour, the Christ, and the LORD. And that reminds us also that we should consider the Lord's Supper as God's own extension of the incarnation. The Son of God has come in the flesh, and He still comes to us in flesh and blood right here where we are, to offer, convey, and to seal to us the benefits of His incarnation. He who eats His flesh and drinks His blood has eternal life, and He will raise Him up on the last day.