

SERMON FOR CHRISTMAS (Cape Town - 25 December 2008)

Text: ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2:15-20)

At Christmas time I am always reminded of what I read about one of the greatest German theologians of the mid-twentieth century, called Helmut Thielicke. The story goes that during the week leading to Christmas he always placed a particular photo on his desk. It was a photo of a Nativity play. When his students and others saw it, they immediately noticed that it was not taken during a professional production. There were no children in the play as one would have expected. Instead it was played by some rather scruffy looking men.

When they inquired about the characters in the photo, Helmut Thielecke usually made them guess. Most of them guessed that they were members of a previous congregation he served. But they were all wrong. The characters on the photo were hard-line *criminals and murderers*, whom Helmut Thielecke used to visit during a prison ministry.

And he said, no nativity play touched his heart as much as that of these men. The one man always got the same role. He was one of the shepherds and he would kneel at the manger of Jesus and say with a quivering voice: "***I lay in the darkest valley of death, but you were my sun...***" And Helmut Thielicke said: "He meant it. He wasn't role playing. He meant it. He experienced this miracle from darkness to light."

When we or our children do a play it is different. We had a really good nativity play during our Advent celebrations this year. The children love it. In general they like to role play. And as parents we are quite proud to see our children on stage and sometimes intrigued by their performing skills.

But for those criminals it wasn't a performance. Their own lives were unfolding in the play.

We need to remember: The shepherds on the field weren't people like you and me. Bear with me, if I say: They were the Kayalitsha or Nyanga type. That doesn't mean they were criminals. Not all poor people are criminals. But somehow the shepherds were *seen* to be like thieves. Herding their flocks they invariably encroached on

grazing land that didn't belong to them. As a result they were ranked with donkey drivers, butchers, sailors and other *despised* occupations.

But it is to *them* (of all people) that the angel of God appeared and said: ***"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news ... Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord"*** (Lk 1:10-11).

And do you know what? They were happy! They were so, so happy!! People that know darkness, appreciate light. People that know suffering or pain, enjoy healing.

Just imagine the angel of God appearing to a feasting king Herod, saying: "Today a saviour has been born to you!" He would have said: "Get out!" Fact is, king Herod wouldn't have been touched by this message, just as so many people today in our affluent society aren't touched by the Gospel message. We worry about brand clothing and the increasing price of our holiday destinations.

The shepherds were happy. It was not a matter that they needed a saviour *more* than the ruling elite in Jerusalem. It is just they had *already* experienced the darkness in which we humans live and can be our reality tomorrow. I experienced a tiny, little bit of this darkness when last week my finger was ripped off my hand.

"A Saviour has been born to you." That was a different sound to the shepherds. Remember ancient Israelite laws prevented people like these shepherds to live to their full human potential. As thieves they couldn't enter the cities after dark. Deemed to be unclean, they couldn't enter the temple of God. Here was the one who would tear the boundaries of division and separation down and elevate them to the highest order: children of God.

They were happy. And their happiness made them do two things. First, they rushed off to Bethlehem. This is communicated in a most interesting way. When the angel left, the shepherds said to one another: ***"Let's go to Bethlehem and see the thing (or the word) that has happened."***

You see, God gives us a "word", but usually you don't "see" anything. For you to see you need to *act* on the word. When Jesus said to his disciples: "Follow me!" They actually had to get up. They had to take this leap of faith to leave everything behind and to trust him that he will lead them. If you don't let go and embark on the journey with God, nothing happens. The words of God just become an object of your contemplation, but it doesn't effect or change your life.

But here comes the real surprise! When the shepherds rush off to Bethlehem, what do they see?

They encounter a scene as "ordinary" as can be. Who knows, after the glorious angelic encounter they may have expected a bit more in Bethlehem. What they found

was a father, a mother and a little baby lying in a manger. Excuse the analogy: It is like being sent to one of our townships and there in a shack is a baby wrapped in blanket.

So what in the world made them believe? What made them believe that this is the saviour of the world? There is only one thing: The “word” of the angel corresponded with the scene in Bethlehem. The angel had said to the shepherds: ***“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*** What convinced them was not some extraordinary miracle. What convinced them was, what they saw was exactly what the angel had said.

This where we so often get it wrong. We have our perceptions, we have our wishes, how God is to reveal himself to us. What we need to do, however, is to *listen* to God’s word. God is different. His thoughts are not our thoughts. And his ways are not our ways (Is. 55:8).

“There is going to be a child in a manger”, that is what the angel had said. And when these shepherds saw it, they believed. Believing does not mean that I have to switch off my human intellect. But it does mean that I need to learn, based on the word of God, to seek God in the humanness of this world, in the “ordinary”.

I experienced God this last week in hospital. My finger didn’t grow back again. In fact it is still hurting. But I experienced him in the many of the kind words spoken to me in hospital and by the visit of some people I didn’t really expect to see, who just came to show me some empathy. So often we find God in the places and persons “least” expected.

That is the first things the Shepherds did: They rushed off to Bethlehem to see what the word had said. And they weren’t put of by the ordinariness of the scene.

The second thing they did was: On the way home they, these uneducated Shepherds of Bethlehem, spread the word. They are the first Gospel preachers in the New Testament. Again this is interesting. They weren’t the first that heard that the Messiah was to be born. Before them there were at least two others. There was Zechariah, the priest in Jerusalem and the father of John the Baptist. Then there was Mary, the mother of Jesus. But both kept the words strictly speaking to themselves.

But when it was time to spread the Word, God used the Shepherds. That is typical. God always seems to turn the things of this world on its head. In ancient Mediterranean society, shepherds were not seen to be trustworthy. In fact, shepherds were banned from giving testimony in a court of law.

But those whom we reject, God uses in his kingdom. With the hearts filled with joy the shepherds traveled back home. And as they went along, they tolled about Jesus. Interestingly nobody told them to do so. It just came naturally because their hearts

were full.

As this message reached the people some rejected it: What? The saviour of the world is born in a manger!!! Others again accepted it. Of Mary we read that she “pondered the words in her heart”. It wasn’t easy for Mary. And she grew in her faith as she went along. But those truly rejoicing are the shepherds.

Our text concludes with the words: ***“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”*** Let us also go and glorify God. Amen.