

TALK FOR THE JOINT CAROL SERVICE

13.12.14 Joss Bray

It's great to see everyone here and share some Christmas time together.

I want to talk about sheep and shepherds. It's a very Christmassy theme isn't it?

When Jesus was born, Luke tells us that there were shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. Actually, some of the flocks may have been flocks of goats - we don't know, but traditionally, its sheep - so we'll stick with sheep.

In those days, shepherds spent a lot of time with their sheep and protected them with their lives. It was a 24 hour a day, 365 day a year job. Being with them so much, meant that the sheep knew their voices and trusted and followed them. The shepherds also knew their sheep and would lead the sheep from the front - not driving them from behind - but walking ahead. They would go and rescue any who had fallen behind or strayed away from the flock

They would have had a big stick to fight off wild animals and a crook to hook around sheep that may be stuck down a hole or in a gulley and pull them back to safety. The shepherds led their sheep to good pasture - with plenty of grazing and water. They made sure that all their needs were taken care of and the sheep were safe and secure.

As well as shepherds, when Jesus was born, there were all sorts of other people involved in the events around his birth. So we have shepherds, rich wise men, a king, a young woman and a carpenter - to name but a few. God was sending a message - not to just a few - but to all people regardless of position or wealth.

This is what Matthew tells us in chapter 2:

When (King Herod) had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "

What did the priests and teachers of the law mean when they said "this is what the prophet has written"? Well, that quote is out of Micah - chapter 5 - a book in the Old Testament written about 800 hundred years before Jesus was born. Micah was a prophet whom God spoke to about this same message that he sends to us now - and that is Jesus.

Isn't it amazing that God had a specific plan for that first Christmas so long before it happened, and that he had also told people about it so they knew what to expect. Granted, 800 years is a long time - but clearly people were still waiting. We wouldn't want to wait that long for a Christmas present though would we!

God had been sending the people on earth a message about someone who was coming. who would show his love for the world - someone who would be worth following. So around 30 years later, Jesus described himself as the "good shepherd".

JN 10:14 "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep.

And he did lay down his life - he was crucified and died. But God demonstrated that he was the one who was promised, by raising him back to life. He laid down his life for us - his sheep. And in the same way that Jesus had that close relationship with his Father God - he wants that same close relationship with us.

We might be a bit taken aback by being described as sheep. But if we had a good shepherd we could follow - what would that mean for us in our lives? If we follow Jesus, what can we expect?

Most of us have heard Psalm 23 - lets listen to it again:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,
he restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no
evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell
in the house of the LORD forever.

The message here for us is this:

If we follow Jesus, he will satisfy our needs, he will give us rest, he will restore what needs to be restored. He will show us what is right and wrong. We will still have troubles and problems - even very serious ones, but he will be with us and protect us, as well as bringing us back when we stray down the wrong path - as we all do. He comforts us, he blesses us even when opposition is severe. He gives abundantly to us.

And the result is that we can know that our lives will be filled with goodness and love. We can also have a hope for the future beyond death - living forever in the best place we could ever imagine - only even better.

This message is for all of us, and it is good news - as it was on that first Christmas. It is for young and old, rich and poor, man and woman - whoever we are - no one is excluded. Even if we think that we are too far away from God, Jesus still wants us to follow him.

So come and be restored, comforted and blessed. See how the message of God's love was translated into a person. Remember that you have a personal invitation to eternal life this Christmas.

HEB 13:20

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.