

Homily for Mass during the Night, 24th December 2018

God wishes to save all people through his Son born today.

If people tell us that we are rubbish, little by little we begin to believe them. The shepherds, we understand from scholars, would have had a very low impression of themselves. Jewish culture drew a connection between goodness and personal prosperity: God rewarded those who lived according to his law. The shepherds were poor. Their work would have impeded them from that regular worship which would have made them righteous before God. They were in an objective state of sinfulness. They also had a reputation for recklessness and thievery.

It would be impossible for a shepherd in this social context to ignore others' opinions of him. No doubt after a while you would come to prefer the loneliness of the fields and the long nights of watching over the sheep to the routine petty slights visited upon anybody whom members of a particular society view as unworthy. Others' exclusion of them would have become, we may surmise, a settled attitude of self-exclusion. I am fit only for the sheep. And if somebody does succumb to such a poisonous mind-set it is indeed likely that they will seek consolation in, for example, drinking. And others, looking at them, will say: "Told you."

I once saw a documentary about South Africa in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the apartheid regime and a leading black African politician explained that really it was only at that moment that the principle struggle was beginning. So many of his countrymen had internalised what the apartheid system had said of them, he said. It will take us a long time to come to a new understanding of our identity, he said. Might we say indeed that members of all excluded groups somehow sub-consciously embrace others' denigration of themselves and that this is a feature that we can see in our own society. It is characteristic of people who suffer in this way that they generally keep what they are experiencing to themselves lest worst criticisms be levelled at them.

It is to the excluded, in the persons of the shepherds, that God announces the coming of his Blessed Son. That is massively significant. They are bathed in the glory of God. They do not just see this glory, at a certain remove from them, as Moses perceived God in the Burning Bush. Rather the glory of the Lord "shone around them." They whom society excluded are included in God as he manifests himself through them to the whole of humanity. The beauty of this epiphany is thrown into particular relief because of their poverty: presumably

their clothing was shabby and dirty; presumably they smelt. God who hitherto had dwelt in the Holy of the Holies in the temple of Jerusalem, worshipped by an elite brotherhood of right-living priests, shines upon men who may not have seen the inside of a synagogue for many a year.

The angel tells these shepherd that the Saviour has been born “to you.” He belongs to them. They who possess hardly anything – if they had done so they would have chosen a more congenial lifestyle – now discover that they have been endowed with a privilege beyond estimation. If they had, as I suspect, internalised others’ opinion of themselves, they would have found it very difficult to get their heads around what was happening. Yet one thing they would have known especially well, and this from deep, bitter personal experience: the need to become free. More than most of us, I imagine, they would have had a keen desire to encounter the promised Saviour for, realistically, in him alone lay their only hope. In their poverty and their vulnerability, these men represent each of us, if only we have the courage to acknowledge our neediness alongside theirs.

There is a wonderful scene in a film I once saw, “The Shawshank Redemption,” which is set in a high security gaol in the United States in the 1940s. The hard-bitten convicts are routinely mistreated by a vicious governor and each man has to struggle to resist despair. Then one of their number, the hero of the film, manages to lock himself into the office which contains the microphone for the public address system and he plays a record of an aria sung by a female opera singer and we see each convict looking up in delight and surprise as the beauty of her voice penetrates every corner of the facility. Their thoughts are suddenly elevated and on their faces we can see a dawning recognition of their personal worth. I thought of that scene when I read this evening’s gospel. The shepherds would never have forgotten that the angels, the many angels, “the great throng of the heavenly host”, sang *for them*. The archangel had first appeared to Mary. She, the sinless one, enjoyed God’s favour, the archangel told her. But now many angels were appearing to the shepherds, caught up, as are we all, in their sins, expressing God’s favour also to them.

No doubt they would never have ceased to reflect upon what happened to them that night. No doubt, many will have become members of the early Church. How the first Christians must have marvelled as they told their story of what had happened all those years before. They will have had a particular authority when they spoke because they had experienced personally that

interior revolution, that we call conversion, that is necessary for all disciples of Our Lord. They had come from a dark place in which they had judged themselves to be unworthy because that was others' opinion of them. Now as disciples, as men to whom God had revealed himself in the Person of his Son, they knew with crystal clarity that they were indeed unworthy but this thought did not bother them at all for they knew that God would make them worthy to receive his promised blessings through the gift which he had made to them of his precious Son.

Nobody is more joyful than those who were down on their luck and who suddenly experience unexpected good fortune. The shepherds' joy was the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy that we heard in our first reading. "You have made their joy increase," the prophet said and he likened the people's joy at the birth of the child to that of people at harvest or when they have defeated a vicious enemy. Such joy is full-blooded, deeply felt. It is a joy which is mixed with straightforward relief. Thank goodness, everything is going to be all right! That is Christmas joy.

The shepherds realised immediately that this joy was something that God was calling them to share with others. They who had had the privilege of beholding the angels now had the happy responsibility of inviting others to accept the Lordship of the infant, crucified and risen Saviour too. Yes, Jesus was the long awaited Saviour of the Jewish people but, as Titus remarked in our second reading, now in Jesus, "salvation is possible for the whole human race".

The question each of us is called upon to answer this evening is this: do I accept Jesus as my personal Saviour? I may find that I am labouring under a feeling of worthlessness. I may think deep down that I have effectively excluded myself from the new Kingdom of David which Jesus' birth has brought about. If so, I am wrong. Tonight, the angels continue to proclaim God's glory throughout the world and we join in their singing by participating in this Mass. No-one is excluded from this rejoicing. Jesus founded his Church for everybody.

