



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 93

Sunday 26th December 2021

Today's readings

Luke 2: 17–24 (“Jesus Is Presented in the Temple”)

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Colossians 3: 12–17 (“The New Life in Christ”)

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

- 1 *The first nowell* (CH:323)
- 2 *O little town of Bethlehem* (CH:304)
- 3 *Love came down at Christmas* (CH:316)
- 4 *Blessing and honour and glory and power* (CH:441)
- 5 *It came upon the midnight clear* (CH:303)

In the Name of the Father and of

With Christmas Day gone and Boxing Day here, I wonder how you feel. Perhaps you are delighted to find yourself only at the second day of a wonderful festival, with 11 more days to go. Perhaps you feel relieved that the 25th of December has come and gone, with no infant tantrums, no major floods, and no carbonised turkey. Then again, perhaps you feel slightly uneasy that you are finding yourself just a wee bit down, knowing that after all that preparation, Christmas Day has come ... and has gone. Different people's experiences can be very different indeed.

However you might feel, what is absolutely undeniable is that we have moved on from Christmas Day to Boxing Day. The axis has shifted a fraction of a degree, and maybe we can now afford to sit back and take a leisurely look at what has just taken place in our church and in our faith. Today, let's see if we might be able to align ourselves with one or another of the characters that we find in the story of The Nativity of Christ.

I would like to suggest that on Boxing Day, you might see yourself as either: a shepherd out in the fields; or Mary, the mother of Jesus; or a wise man from the East.

Let's take each one in turn, and let's just see what we might find.

First the shepherds who, according to Luke: "returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

On Boxing Day, you might be all in favour of returning to life as you have always known it, rejoicing at the Good News of Christmas. That, after all, is what the shepherds did. Those shepherds had left their flocks (in the words of the hymn) "on Bethlehem's plains by night", with the single purpose of responding in faith to the angels' news of a special birth.

I am sure we can all imagine them dropping their shepherds' crooks and running for all they were worth to the place where Jesus lay. These exhausted, smelly outsiders had very low social status, being looked down on by the more sophisticated folk, so they must have been overwhelmed at becoming the very first people to have learned the Good News of the birth of God's Son. And when those shepherds arrived at the manger, they would have seen for themselves that this News was Good indeed. So Good was this News that they immediately went out to pass it on to all in Bethlehem who would listen.

And then what did the shepherds do? They "returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." There were flocks to tend, sheep to take care of, wolves to ward off, and if they didn't do this vital work ... then who would?

If you are finding yourself with the shepherds today, you know that life goes on and never really stops. There is your work to be done, your tasks to be completed, your challenges to face. There might be the demands of parenthood, the call of a twelve-and-a-half-hour night shift, the care of an elderly relative, and that (or something broadly similar) is your reality right now. But could it be that over the last 24 hours your reality has actually changed? Like the shepherds, you have come close to Christ's birth, so wherever you might go on Boxing Day, you can return, "glorifying and praising God for all you have heard and seen".

Maybe, then, you are a shepherd, but if you're not, then perhaps you might find yourself as Mary: Mary who heard the excited reports given by the shepherds and who "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart". How profoundly beautiful.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Now here is a thought: could it be that the noble art of “pondering” is due something of a revival? How often do you ponder? Let’s be clear: I don’t mean pondering a menu, or pondering what to wear when you go out in the snow. Pondering – real, serious, Mary-style pondering – is what you do when something so stunningly overwhelming comes your way and you want to make some sort of sense of what you have just experienced. Arguably, the more mysterious the subject in question, the more deep the pondering needs to be. And the deeper that pondering, the greater the wisdom that might very well emerge for you.

All the way through Mary’s pregnancy, strange things had happened to this young woman, whether her visit from an angel, the trip to older cousin Elizabeth, or the struggle to find any – any! – kind of place in which to have her baby. Now for Mary, these events all lie in the past, but they are still fresh in her memory, jostling for position as they fill her head with all sorts of strange thoughts of past, present and, no doubt, future. In our lives, at times like these – at times like Christmastime – it pays us to sit sown down next to Mary, and ponder the meaning of Jesus; to ponder that meaning’s special (and really rather deep) significance. Marys of the world unite ... and get pondering.

Let’s recap: you might be a shepherd or you might be a Mary. But there is one more set of characters who can inform our Boxing Day: the wise men, whom we might well meet more formally next Sunday. Once those Magi had fulfilled their role in this unfolding tale of salvation, what was it that they did? Put simply, “they left for their own country by another road”. This is correctly understood as meaning that their camel satnav needed to be set to an alternative route so as to avoid evil King Herod and his brutal soldiers who would most likely have wanted a quiet word in some dingy back alley of Jerusalem’s inner city. It was right and proper for the wise men to make their escape while they could.

But maybe we can dwell on an entirely different meaning here: “leaving by another road”. If you had gone into the house of Joseph and Mary, and if you had brought your gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh to the new baby king, would you not leave that scene by a new road, your life’s whole orientation altered for ever by both the Good News of Christmas and the world’s harsh response to it? Christmas has the power to turn us around in our tracks and make us reorientate ourselves for a new kind of journey. I feel sure that the wise men would have had a lot to dwell upon on their long trek eastwards back to their old lives ... or, more likely, back to lives that would never be the same again.

What then do we have this Boxing Day? It seems we may have a Boxing Day for you shepherds, a Boxing Day for you Marys, a Boxing Day for you Wise Men. Irrespective of where you stand in this Boxing Day roll call, one thing is clear: Christmas is much more of a “heart season” than it is a “head season”. With your Christmas faith, you need to, “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts ... and be thankful.”

Today, open those hearts to the Good News which has come to you and which has come to all humanity, so that in the midst of these hard and wintry days your hearts will be warmed and healed and guided, not merely by the beauty and grace of a wonderful story, but by the beauty and grace of a very particular wonderful baby.

Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere.

Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born! Amen.

Praying for others

God of the Nativity,
we turn to you remembering the story of Christ's birth:
of parents with nowhere to go, fleeing to a foreign land;
of shepherds, the poor of the earth, being visited from heaven;
of wise men with gifts who came from afar and worshipped the Child.

We are caught up in the power and the beauty of Christmas,
so challenge us now, we pray.

Help us to see Christ in the refugee baby, on a cold, dark road.

Lead us to find you in those who are cast out or ignored.

Show us those precious gifts in life which make us know
that you are God and that you are here.

Above all, help us to take Christmas and to share it
in new and wonderful ways with those who need its Good News
in so many situations of hurt
and in so many places of despair.

Make us your herald angels to our world, we pray.

In Jesus' Name we ask this. Amen.



“Shepherd’s Bow” (c.1304–06)

Artist unknown

Ivan Honchar Museum, Kyiv, Ukraine
(public domain)