

Then Came Shepherds



At Christmas and at other times, life is often painful and difficult for us as individuals or families. Even when we are trying to do and say what is kind and loving, things seem to go wrong in unexpected ways. It was the same for Joseph and Mary, when Jesus was born.

The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and announced that she would have a son, Jesus. He would be great, and be called, “the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32). Mary, although perhaps glimpsing something of what this would mean for her as an unmarried woman, nevertheless said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38.)

Mary was engaged to Joseph. When he knew that Mary was pregnant, Matthew’s gospel tells us that he planned to dismiss her quietly to save her from public disgrace. Then, in a dream, Joseph too, was visited by an angel who encouraged him to marry Mary because the child to be born was, “from the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1:18-25).

These events might have caused enough trouble and anxiety for Mary and Joseph to cope with, but there was more to come. The Roman Emperor, Augustus, decreed that there was to be a registration of people that required them to return to their own town to be counted. Therefore, Joseph, being of the family of David, travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem with a pregnant Mary. While they were there, Jesus was born. There was no place for this

family in an inn, and Mary, herself, wrapped Jesus in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, where usually food was placed for animals to eat. So where were they? In a cave, a stable, a rough shed? We do not know.

It was night. How did Joseph and Mary feel? They were alone, without help or even a comfortable bed for their son, only an animal's manger. But then God intervened, and something surprising happened, involving shepherds.

The sheep pictured in this leaflet, remind us of the presence of shepherds in the story of the birth of Jesus. Mary, and then Joseph, had received visits from an angel. Now it was the turn of shepherds to have an angelic visit while out in the fields at night watching over their sheep - sheep probably destined to be sacrificed to God in the temple at Jerusalem.

At this time, shepherds seemed to have had a contradictory reputation. Society despised them as a class. Their work prevented them from worshipping in the temple, and they were considered unreliable, so not allowed to give testimony in law-courts. On the other hand, In Psalm 23, God is described by David as a 'shepherd', and in John 10:11, Jesus applied to himself the image of a good shepherd who cares for and is prepared to die for his sheep. These shepherds in Bethlehem were the first people outside of the family to know of Jesus' birth. How did they respond, and why did God choose them?

When an angel in glory appeared to the shepherds, at first they were terrified. But the angel delivered to them good news, the birth of "a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord." The shepherds were then told they would recognise this baby because he would be wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. (Luke 2:11-12.) Many angels praised God and then disappeared.

Immediately the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem and see for themselves what had happened. They hurried off and found Mary, Joseph and, as the angel had said, a baby lying in a manger. They told Mary and Joseph and everyone they saw, all that had been revealed to them by the angel, before returning to their sheep and praising God.

Mary responded in silence, holding within her all that the shepherds had said. God had worked in a mysterious way through enigmatic strangers who had affirmed her son, and also herself for agreeing to be his mother.

When Jesus was born as one of us, he and his family experienced suffering and joy. Joseph and Mary had no friends or family members to help them, as far as we know. Things were difficult. Then came the shepherds, strangers with questionable reputations. They saw the baby in a manger, and made known what the angel had told them about this child. God choosing shepherds to welcome Jesus, can indicate and affirm that Jesus Christ had come, born as a human baby, for *all* people, no matter who they were or are, for God's love was and is, inclusive.

Do we recognise Jesus Christ in a manger as a sign of the One who in love feeds us in various ways, even in Holy Communion? Also, does the wrapping of Jesus in cloth and placing him possibly in a cave, mirror the dead body of Jesus wrapped in a cloth and laid in a rock tomb, before rising to new life for us?

In the story of Jesus' birth, can we pass through pain and grief, (a death?), to a deeper loving relationship with God? Perhaps this Christmas, like Mary, we can ponder the amazing words spoken to her by the shepherds when she was struggling to understand her life? Also, like the shepherds, whoever we are, and whatever difficulties we may be facing, can we, as members of Christ's Body, the Church, be open to growing in our life in Christ, and to share it with others in expressions of joy and love?

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December 2025*