

So we had a visit a few minutes ago from Joshua the Shepherd (obviously shepherds these days, they've gone with the times, they do have mobile phones now) and so Joshua was telling us about what had happened. Joshua was explaining to Mr Cohen just why some of the sheep had gone missing. But actually shepherds back in Jesus' day, in the New Testament times, had a really really low social status: they were regarded as, you know, pretty much the lowest of the low. Their work was very antisocial and it was physically taxing, and, although you wouldn't believe it, actually in the Middle East it could get very cold at night even when it was hot in the day. It could also be dangerous because back then in the Middle East there were wolves, lions and even bears (so I don't think I'd have been choosing to be shepherd any time soon), and of course thieves were a constant threat back then as well, somebody coming to steal your sheep. And of course sheep themselves are not the most inspiring of animals. The thing is, on our Christmas cards sheep look so look cute and their fleece is always beautiful white, and they look, you know, they look so cuddly you'd like to take them home and have them sit in your lounge with you.

However, I discovered for myself about 15 years ago what sheep are really like because a friend of mine was a minister in Stepney in the East End of London and decided to put on a real nativity at Stepney City Farm. Well, it was a wet Christmas and so by the time it got to the time for this real nativity the place was a mud pit – we were sliding all over the place. Now he was putting this on particularly for local preschool children: the idea was families could come along with their children and the little preschoolers they could take part and take the different characters, you know Mary and Joseph, and some shepherds, and some wise men – all of that sort of idea – and he made sure there were enough parts for all the children that came. And the idea was they had a big box and the children could take costumes from the box, put them on and then be able to act out the parts, and the idea was that my friend he narrated the story (if you saw the Vicar of Dibley she did a bit of this as well back a few years ago), but he narrated the story and lead people around the different parts of the farm, and the children acted it out as the story was told. The story we ended up in the barn where the straw bales were kept to feed the animals and they been arranged as a little bit of back drop, so the bales were at the back and there was some space at the front where Mary and Joseph could be. And it wasn't fully live, this nativity, it was a doll they used for the baby Jesus (which I think was probably a wise idea – I'm not sure anybody was prepared to give up their newborn to go in this manger that was being used). Then the shepherds came in and they stood on one side with the bales behind them, and then some wise men came and they stood at the back as well, and then the parents were just taking some pictures of their children looking all – and of course there were angels as well, so there were angels at the back as well – and so they were all looking really quite angelic. However after the pictures were taken some of the children were getting quite restless, in particular Joseph was a bit sick of wearing this uncomfortable costume and so my friend said “we're just going to finish with a Prayer.” Now one or two of us adult there were a little bit concerned about how lively things were getting amongst some of the characters and so we kept her eyes open just to make sure that nothing kicked off while we were praying. And it just so happened that as my friend was praying I noticed Joseph had enough of this and so he grabbed hold of the baby Jesus by the foot and he swung him like that, and he threw him straight over the bales of hay, and so just as we're praying I saw the baby Jesus flying right across the stable, and it was just one of those moments that will stay with me forever.

But the reason I tell you that story is that I do remember how smelly the sheep and the other

animals were – I mean it had been a wet Christmas but they were so smelly and I was convinced I could see the little ticks and things jumping around on their backs; there were a few donkeys and a few other animals they had there. But in particular they were so smelly, so dirty, and they also, they kept bumping into each other these sheep – I think possibly what it was: quite a few these children are quite excitable and so they were running around, you know not being very wise, the wise men and women that sort of thing – but the sheep kept bumping into each other because of the all of the running about, and so they did seem to me to be a bit stupid (just to let you know that).

Going back to the shepherds in Jesus' day, I'm guessing that sometimes when it wasn't too cold and perhaps there was a night full of stars – not like tonight (I don't think the clouds and the fog has cleared all day, has it?), but on a nice starry night perhaps it could have its good moments being a shepherd. However. I think these shepherds learned something that most of us learn in life: that life can be boring, it's not always exciting, it's not always full of stuff that is exciting and fun – their lives had plenty of dull drudgery in it. But they needed the work and I guess they did their best as shepherds, and life can be like that for us as well, can't it? It's not all full of fun and games, life can have it drudgery and its boring sides. We may not always feel appreciated for what we do – just like the shepherds probably didn't. However like them we can find, sometimes, that life can throw up surprises, and what a surprise those shepherds had that night! They were minding their own business, looking after the sheep and then suddenly, a great light and all the singing and the Heavenly Host above them – no wonder they were scared and the angels had to say first of all “Don't be afraid!” Because they probably thought their end had come. But God had something special in store for these rough smelly shepherds. They were chosen by God to be the very first people to hear about the birth of Jesus Christ. The angel's said to them “Don't be afraid, I am here with good news for you! [Not just for everybody else, not just for the rest of the world, *for you.*] This good news will bring great joy to all the people this day in David's town your Saviour. [You smelly shepherds there, it's your Saviour, he's come come for you and this is what will prove it to you.] You'll find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

I think after that night those shepherds found that life was never the same again. Can't you just imagine that for the rest of their lives they have an amazing story to tell their families. I like to imagine: perhaps the shepherds once they'd retired, and perhaps they've got their grandchildren around them and they say to them “Let me tell you a story about when I was a young shepherd and the most amazing thing happened to me and my friends: angels appeared in the sky and told us God's special messenger had been born down in the town below where we were looking after our sheep...” Life is often mundane for us as well as those shepherds but God offers a surprise to each one of us if we'll received it. One of the names given to Jesus in the Old Testament is “Emmanuel”, and Emmanuel simply means “God with us” (wherever we find ourselves).

There are days of anxiety and fear, aren't they, because there's so much worry about the Covid virus and about other things in our world, but God gave his son Emmanuel, God with us, alongside us, in this life. That's the surprise promise: we need never be alone, God promises to walk with us in the ordinariness of our lives giving meaning and purpose and Direction.

I pray God's blessing on this Christmas time.