

Christmas Midnight 2011

On our holiday at the beginning of December Karen and I spent a few days in Graaff Reinet. Karen ran a coaching workshop for a friend, and I had the opportunity to trace and find the graves of a branch of my family who had lived in Graaff Reinet. My own branch moved on to Colesberg and Kimberley but tracing them will have to occur on another holiday sometime in the future.

On the Saturday we made our way up into the mountains and to the little village of New Bethesda, the location of the famous owl-house of Helen Martin who made some very weird but interesting sculptures from cement and coloured bottles. In the courtyard of the house is a scene of a whole procession of people – kings, angels, shepherds, as well as camels and a host of other animal and birds, making their way to the stable at Bethlehem to worship the new born king.

We had had lunch at a small farm just out of town called *The Two Goats Deli*. Here André Cilliers makes beer in a micro brewery and some delicious goats cheese. While tucking into a cheese plater with 3 hard cheeses and three soft cheese, kudu salami and home made bread, one can look across the farm road to the paddocks and see the goats from whose milk the cheese had been made. I took the opportunity to ask Andre about what I had preached a few weeks earlier. I had said in my sermon about separation of the sheep and the goats, that goats had to be driven from behind while sheep followed a leader or a shepherd. Andre said to me that the goats soon learnt a routine and about four or so in the afternoon they would come from the fields and gather at the gate ready to be let into the paddock for the night. “Sheep, on the other hand,” said Andre, “are just plain stupid.”

Perhaps was why there were shepherds on that hillside outside Bethlehem that first Christmas Night. They were there to keep the stupid sheep together and safe. Now I’ve heard lots of stories about shepherds. They are often independent people who do not need the company of others, happy within themselves; sometimes a bit weird in behaviour but certainly very protective of their sheep and very practical people.

I thought about these shepherds as I read through the Gospel for the Christmas Midnight Service and also last Sunday when the choir sang, as they will later in this service, the Shepherd’s Farewell from *L'enfance du Christ* by Hector Berlioz.

I had sung the piece before both in English and in French but maybe for the first time the words really touched me because they summarised all that I’ve said about shepherds in my sermon up to this point.

It is often in carols and hymns that we express our theology and our belief and because the words of carols are the words and thoughts of normal people and not learned, academic theologians and so we can relate to them more easily.

*Thou must leave thy lowly dwelling,
The humble crib, the stable bare.
Babe, all mortal babes excelling,
Content our earthly lot to share.
Loving father, loving mother,
Shelter thee with tender care.*

So sing the shepherds. They – simple, uneducated, lonely, independent people, happy within themselves – they recognise that the baby is more excellent than all other mortal babies. They know without having to find prophecies about it in OT books. How do they know? Because the Angel had brought them the message *‘I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’*

One line of this verse is of utmost importance – *Content our earthly lot to share* – Yes, God became a man and dwelt with us – Immanuel but more than that he was **content** to take the form of a humble human baby and to be one with us. Why? As Paul writing to Titus said: *He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.* That is the Good News of Christmas.

Those shepherds in their farewell to the Holy Family end the verse by imploring the loving father and mother to shelter the baby with tender care. This child might be God but he was a fully human baby with an important task to carry out.

*Blessed Jesus, we implore thee
With humble love and holy fear,
In that land that lies before thee,
Forget not us who linger here.
May the shepherd's lowly calling
Ever to thy heart be dear.*

The Holy Family is about to escape Herod's wrath by going into exile in Egypt when these shepherds come with their farewell. And so the shepherds implore the Christ child not to forget them who linger behind in Bethlehem. This message has a particular poignancy for us because it is not only talking about those shepherds on the hills above Bethlehem but also us today who still linger in this world. **"Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again"** is what we will acclaim in the Eucharist Prayer later in this service. We can proclaim this because we believe that Christ hasn't forgotten us. He is the Good Shepherd who remembers his sheep – we like those Karoo sheep around New Bethesda *are just plain stupid* but we have a shepherd who knows his sheep – but do we know **his** voice?

*Blessed are ye beyond all measure,
Thou happy father, mother mild;
Guard thee well your heavenly treasure,
The Prince of peace, the holy child.
God go with you, God protect you,
Guide you safely through the wild.*

If we **do** know the voice of the good shepherd then God **will** go with us, God **will** protect us and God **will** guide us safely through the wild of this life on earth.

Carols are not just musical interludes between serious stuff like praying, preaching and bible readings. Oh no. As Percy Dearmer defined them in his Preface to the Oxford Book of Carols, they are "simple, hilarious, popular and modern" I must give the other means of the words "hilarious" and "modern" Here hilarious means "boisterously merry" and many carols are just this. Dearmer, when he says modern he meant, "everyday and commonplace". And that is what I believe all carols and especially the Shepherd's Farewell are – They take the simple expression of, for example, those shepherds of Bethlehem and make them in a profound theological statement that simply folk like you and me can understand. This afternoon I listened to the 9 lessons and carols from kings college Cambridge via the internet. They sang a Bib Chilcott setting of an anonymous Shepherds' Carol

We stood on the hills, Lady,
Our day's work done,
Watching the frosted meadows
That winter had won.

The evening was calm, Lady,
The air so still,
Silence more lovely than music
Folded the hill.

There was a star, Lady,
Shone in the night,
Larger than Venus it was

And bright, so bright.

Oh, a voice from the sky, Lady,
It seemed to us then,
Telling of God being born
In the world of men.

And so we have come, Lady,
Our day's work done,
Our love, our hopes, ourselves
We give to your son.

As we give our love, our hope ourselves to the Christ Child let us join the Angels' song: *'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'*