

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son and The Holy Spirit? Amen.

When we were back home in England at this time of year, we would get inundated with round robin letters. These would detail in extraordinary detail the achievements of the various children in the families that were sending the cards. Since we've got to America, we've got far less. I'm not sure if that's a cultural thing or simply that our children have grown up and we're out of that loop, but actually I miss them. If anybody here wants to send a Christmas card talking about their children, please do. They always were a great source of amusement to me.

Here's an example, a classic of the genre, from a friend of mine called 'Simon', not his real name, just in case the tape ever gets to him, but note the number of verbs in this extract from a recent Christmas letter. "Eleanor", that's his daughter, "Eleanor has many activities after school. This year, she has been learning French, German, Spanish and singing. Eleanor has learnt to swim and she has taken up horse riding. She is learning to canter and jump. She also attends Rainbows and at her school ballet test, she won the Silver Rose Bowl for modern ballet."

Do you know how old Eleanor was when this letter was written? Six. As I say, I read that because I wanted to draw attention to the amount of verbs, the amazing achievements that Eleanor had managed in her short time with us. In that reading we heard from Luke, there's a similar intensity of verbs, lots and lots of verbs associated with the shepherds who feature in that story.

Here's just a few. The shepherds, we're told in those verses, watched, heard, went, found, told and praised. I wanted to spend a few minutes thinking about the shepherds, about all the verbs associated with them and what they were doing that first Christmas morning.

Firstly, they watched. The first thing we're told the shepherds were doing was watching in their fields, which means that the first Christmas probably wasn't in December, because at that time and place, shepherds would only be out watching in their fields between May and October. I hope I haven't dashed any illusions with that.

Secondly, they heard. Whilst they were watching, they heard this wondrous message from the angel about the birth of a special baby. They hear the amazing sound of the angels praising God singing, "Glory to God in the highest".

Then, they went. There's a great simplicity and straightforwardness about this account. The shepherds didn't doubt the angels. They didn't sit around discussing what it all meant. They simply went to try and find the baby.

I like the down to earth feel of Luke's Gospel account. It's very different to Matthew's story, which features wise men and houses, not stables. In Luke, it's much more down to earth.

The shepherds could have said, "Wasn't that amazing? Wasn't that an incredible experience when the angels came amongst us? Let's stay here and see if the angels come back." They didn't do that. They went off to find the baby who was The Savior, The Messiah, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger, which wasn't how you'd expect to find The Messiah. The swaddling clothes was the way that the poor of the region wrapped their babies. The manger in which he was lying was a feeding trough for cattle.

The message from the angels didn't involve the shepherds going anywhere where they weren't familiar. They knew the circumstances in which Jesus was born. He'd come to their territory. He might even have been born in one of their mangers. They seem to find it straight away. There was no need to be guided by a star on embark on a great long journey. Jesus had entered their world, their patch.

Fourthly, they found. This is the heart of the story. This is the most amazing part of the story. The Savior who is Christ the Lord was born in an outhouse. That's where he was to be found. God entered our world in the most humble of circumstances. Who found him there? A ramshackle group of nameless shepherds who were out in their fields because they weren't welcome in polite society. This was a gang of social misfits and outcasts and they were the ones who found Jesus. They were the ones to whom was entrusted the good news that God had come amongst his people.

God can still be found today by unlikely people in

unlikely circumstances. The shepherds had a life changing encounter that first Christmas, and it wasn't the spectacular encounter with the angels on the hillside which changed them. It was the encounter they had with a baby wrapped in rags lying in a feeding trough.

Our God is a god of surprises. Perhaps one of the most surprising things is that our God is a god who meets us in the midst of our ordinary lives. He's not to be found by escaping to exotic locations. We find him as we open our eyes to the God who is with us in the every day, in the ordinary. God has come amongst us.

Then, we're told the shepherds themselves told. Verse 17: "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".

I read an article recently, well it was when I was back in England, it was written by the leader of the British Humanist Association, for whom this is always a slightly challenging time of year. He was giving reasons for disbelieving the Christmas story. He was debunking it. One of his prime reasons concerned the shepherds. He was troubled by what the shepherds did with their sheep. He thought that they wouldn't possibly leave their sheep and go off and search of a baby in case their sheep were poached.

Sadly, this poor man completely missed the point. The shepherds found something so amazing that they didn't care what happened to their sheep. They got so excited they couldn't keep it to themselves. They had to go off and tell everyone what they had found in that stable.

Actually, the fact that it was the shepherds doing the telling is one of the compelling reasons that this story might be true, because why would you make up a story where the first witnesses were the ones who's witness had least credibility.

Finally, the shepherds praised God. The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them. The shepherds returned to their normal routine as changed people. They'd got a new view of themselves. They were no longer outsiders. They'd

been granted a great privilege. They were the witness, the witnesses to God's coming. They'd got a new view of God. They'd encountered this amazing down to earth God who has come amongst his people and made himself known. This is the heart of the Christmas message we celebrate this joyous morning.

It's about the coming of Emmanuel, God with us, God amongst us. We too can join with the shepherds in the most appropriate verb of all, to praise. We gather in church this morning as ordinary people ready to praise and worship the God who has come amongst us in the baby Jesus and made himself known to us. Amen.