

December 25, 2014 Christmas Homily

Some forty years ago the Italian filmmaker Franco Zefferelli made a splendid film based on the Life of Christ and entitled "Jesus of Nazareth". The director cast many of the world's most renowned actors in featured roles. Oddly, and for whatever reason, he chose unknown actors to play the part of the shepherds in the scene of Christ's birth. So insignificant was their role that their names did not even appear in the final credits of the film!

Consider also a Christmas play. Once again the shepherds appear in the background. They enter the stage quietly, only to leave moments later without any fanfare. While on stage, they remain silent. Unlike the three kings, they bear no gifts for the Christ child. Their names are unknown. It is for one purpose that they appear on stage, namely, to gaze upon the child in wonder.

One of the foremost biblical scholars of the last fifty years, Rev. Raymond Brown, has written a comprehensive and penetrating book on the birth of the Messiah. In his book Rev. Brown points out that in St. Luke's narrative of Christ's birth the shepherds "...are moved to the front of the stage." They have a featured role!

But who are the shepherds? They were poor, simple souls who ranked very low on the social scale. Respectable members of society looked down upon them because they were considered untrustworthy and dishonest. In Jewish holy books, they were often indicted for grazing their herds on other people's land. Rabbis considered them "Ritually unclean" and therefore unfit for worship in the temple. Their unsavory reputation precluded them from serving as witnesses in court. Shepherds lived "outside the law" making them, in the eyes of the Jewish authorities, outlaws!

But why were the shepherds favored by God? Why were they the first to receive the good news of Christ's birth? Allow me to assume the role of Detective.

First, consider the mystery of Bethlehem, the city of King David. In his youth, young David was a Shepherd. The newborn child, Jesus, will one day be the Shepherd of Israel; Second, the Shepherds had a sacred duty to perform. Their animals were used for the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. Let us recall that Christ is the Lamb of God whose mission was to offer his life in sacrifice for his people; Third, they were among the poorest of the poor of Israel. We recall the words of Mary: "God has lifted up the lowly" (Lk.1:52) and throughout Luke's Gospel we learn of God's love for the poor; Fourth, the Shepherds were watchful people. According to Pope Benedict, "keeping watch" is a phrase that is of central importance in the Gospels. They were truly watchful people... with a lively sense of God. They were waiting for a light to shine. Indeed, they were waiting for God. One could not accuse them of being tone-deaf. Nor did they have a "tin ear" (An incapacity to hear something in an accurate way); and fifth, they answered the call of God immediately. "So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger." (Lk. 2:16). What had been announced to them was so important that they had to go to Bethlehem at once. God is the highest priority!

What lessons can we derive from the Christmas story and, in particular, the Shepherds key role in the narrative?

The angel announces the good news to all of us. We, in turn, should act like the Shepherds. In this age of smart phones and the social media, we must not allow ourselves to be distracted. The Shepherds could hear the angelic message because they were awake. Are we attuned to the voice of heaven? In addition, in Sacred Scripture we are told that those favored by God were amazed or astonished "All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds." (Lk.2:18).

We are each gifted with an innate sense of surprise and wonder. If we cease to wonder, then we lose what is one of the characteristic marks of humanity. "Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them." (Lk.2:20). Not ones to doubt the possibility of a miracle, the Shepherds responded in faith and gratitude to the Goods News.

On the night of Christ's birth, the glory of the Lord "...shone round the Shepherds..." (Lk.2:9). As we continue our celebration of Christ-mass let us keep in mind that in the Eucharist we, too, are surrounded by the glory of God. Our Blessed Lord comes once again as "Living Bread" and our Church is Bethlehem, which means "House of Bread".

Lastly, let us reflect on the beauty and necessity of silence. It is worthy to note that throughout the ages artists have depicted the Shepherds in a posture of prayer in the presence of the newborn Christ in the manger. Perhaps the most famous of these depictions is "The Adoration of the Shepherds". In silence, we can muse on the wonder of the incarnation. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn.1:14).

A blessed Christmas to one and all!