

Light in a Dark World

It had been dark for a long time. That's what we were talking about that night. In fact it's what we often talked about around the fire at night after the day's work was done. It had been a normal day. We were up with the sun in the morning and spent the day ensuring that the flocks had enough pasture and water on the hills near Bethlehem, always keeping an eye out for sheep-stealers, both of the animal and human varieties.

At the end of the day we gathered the sheep together into the sheepfolds, counted them as they went in and checked them for cuts, lameness or disease. Then we got a fire going and cooked and ate our meal. All the while we kept an eye on the sheep. In many ways the night-time was the most dangerous. Even although the sheep were in their pens, the protection was flimsy and, under cover of darkness, lions, bears, wolves or sheep rustlers could attack without warning.

But after our meal, we had some time to sit around the fire and talk, before some would take the first watch and others would get some sleep. Matthat, Jacob, Melki, Simeon, Judah and myself were sitting around the fire, along with Eliud, a young boy. Invariably the talk eventually came round to our grievances and the darkness of the times, and that night was no different.

Simeon and Matthat, two of the older shepherds, were talking about attacks by wild animals they had witnessed. Simeon liked to show the scars on his arm from a lion's claw, received when he had tried unsuccessfully to rescue a lamb from its jaws. It became a kind of standing joke. You know, "Here comes Simeon's scars!" "How big was the cat that scratched you, Simeon?" and stuff like that. However, young Eliud had never heard the story before and he was suitably impressed, but then he asked, "How weren't you able to rescue the lamb, like King David did when he was a boy?" There was some laughter at that, but Simeon wasn't put out. Even to be mentioned in the same breath as the great King David he took as a compliment.

"I think that was one of the greatest things that David ever did", he said, "to rescue a lamb from a lion, and then, when the lion turned on him, to kill it with his bare hands and his shepherd's club. People talk about his killing Goliath, but that was nothing. I've known shepherds good with a sling who could hit a wolf right between the eyes at a hundred paces and kill it stone dead (if you'll pardon the pun!)"

"You'll be telling us soon," said Matthat, "That it was a giant wolf!"

"Not at all," retorted Simeon, "The point is the accuracy. David knew he could put a couple of stones

right between the giant's eyes, before Goliath could move, and if that didn't kill him, he had one for each eye and one to spare! But to kill a lion with your bare hands..." he paused for effect, "Now that's a different matter!"

Amid the laughing and the general agreement, Jacob, the oldest man present, said, "Would that we had a King David on the throne now, instead of that Herod. At least he would know what it's like to be a working shepherd—to be out days and nights in all kinds of conditions, summer and winter, cold and heat, and facing all kinds of dangers. Herod is too busy sucking up to the Romans and deciding which of his sons will rule after him and which he will kill."

"I'd like to see King Herod fight a lion with his bare hands," laughed Matthat. "Now that would be a sight to see!"

"Well, in his younger days," said Jacob, "Herod was a great warrior, but now he's on his last legs, or so I've heard anyway. Ruined himself with too much wine, women and song."

"Fat chance of us having too much wine, women and song!" joked Judah, and we all laughed.

"But we can have a song anyway," said Melki, "How about David's great shepherd's song?" He started singing softly and then we all gradually joined

in, until by the end the sound of strong male voices had swelled to echo in the dark hills:

*The LORD is my shepherd; no want shall I know.
He makes me lie down where the green pastures grow;
He leads me to rest where the calm waters flow.*

*My wandering steps he brings back to his way,
In straight paths of righteousness making me stay;
And this he has done his great name to display.*

*Though I walk in death's valley, where darkness is near,
Because you are with me, no evil I'll fear;
Your rod and your staff bring me comfort and cheer.*

*In the sight of my en'mies a table you spread.
The oil of rejoicing you pour on my head;
My cup overflows and I'm graciously fed.*

*So surely your covenant mercy and grace
Will follow me closely in all of my ways;
I will dwell in the house of the LORD all my days.*

But as our voices sank away into silence, the darkness seemed deeper than ever.

The silence was broken by the boyish voice of Eliud. "I've never understood," he said, "Why it is that

in the old stories, from the Writings that they read in the synagogue, shepherds are honoured—even the LORD is said to be our shepherd—and yet today we are all despised and looked down on.”

“That’s true enough,” growled Simeon. “Once upon a time, shepherds were respected. Our forefather Jacob was a shepherd, Moses was a shepherd, David was a shepherd, Amos the prophet was a shepherd. But now they treat us all like thieves and vagabonds. That’s not to say that some aren’t thieves and vagabonds,” he said looking pointedly at Judah, and we all laughed. But Simeon wasn’t finished. “And they don’t even think we are trustworthy enough to be witnesses in court. I know a case where if a shepherd had been allowed to testify, the son of a rich landowner would have been found guilty, but of course that would never do. But the worst thing of all is this: they won’t even allow us to worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. They say we’re unclean.”

“And in your case, they’re right!” said Judah, which made us all laugh again.

Simeon didn’t even deign to retort. He just gave Judah a withering look. He was warming to his subject now. “They won’t let us into the Temple because they say we’re unclean, but they let the sheep we look after into the Temple—to sacrifice them—and only clean

animals can be sacrificed. So our sheep are good enough, but we aren't!"

"Simeon's right—for once!" said Matthat, "And not just that. These priests up in Jerusalem have everything tied up with the rich landowners—some that we work for too. They insist that people have to buy their beasts for sacrifice from them in the Temple. No others are good enough. And so they are able to charge what they want."

"It's true," agreed Simeon. "The country is in a mess. No wonder people are turning to the Zealots. What we need is a revolution. Get rid of the Romans, the Greek-loving priests and the filthy landowners, that's what I say!"

"But don't the Zealots murder people?" It was Eliud's voice piping up.

"Yes, you're right, son," said Jacob. "We are never going to be set free by such people. We are living in dark times. We don't want it to get any darker." He paused and the darkness around seemed to have got deeper, the fire was burning low. But Jacob went on, "We were just singing 'The Lord is my shepherd'. We need to trust him. He has promised that he will send the Messiah, his Anointed King, the Son of David. He will set all to rights when he comes."

"But when will he come?" I asked. This was something that interested me greatly. "Things have

been dark for a long time now—ever since the days of the Persian Empire. There’s been no word from the Lord since the days of Nehemiah, and that was over 400 years ago. We’ve been through the reign of terror of the Greek King, Antiochus the Splendid (as they called him), then the brief period of freedom under Judas the Hammer and his family. But since the Romans and Herod came, things have gone from bad to worse. People are taxed to the hilt, and Caesar has now required everyone to register in his home town. That can only mean more taxes. And the religious teachers are more concerned about arguments over niceties of the law than about real evil, and all the while the rich oppress the poor and the strong oppress the weak.”

“Very true,” said Jacob, “But I seem to remember that the prophet Isaiah spoke of such times: ‘Then they’ll look to the earth and see only trouble and anguish and gloomy despair, and they will be thrown out into the dark. Nevertheless, there will be no more darkness and despair. The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali were humbled, but the time will come when Galilee of the nations, by the sea and the Jordan will be filled with glory. The people walking in darkness will see a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be

called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The peace of his government will never end. He will rule with justice on the throne of David for ever. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do it.'

"That may be all very well for the people of Galilee," said Judah, "But what about the people of Judah, David's own tribe, and Bethlehem, David's own town?"

"All the boys in the synagogue know that," said Eliud, "One of them told me he had learned what the prophet Micah said: 'Bethlehem, you're small among the villages of Judah, but out of you will come for me one who will rule Israel, whose origins are from all eternity.'"

"That's right, Eliud," said Jacob, "Didn't my namesake, our father Jacob, speak of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, when he blessed his sons and said that "The sceptre will not depart from Judah, until he comes to whom it belongs"?"

"So that means," said Judah, "that one of us may be the Anointed King! Maybe it's me. After all, I was born in Bethlehem and my name is Judah!"

"Pity help us!" exclaimed Matthat. When the laughter had subsided, Jacob said, "No, when the King returns, he will be of the royal house of David."

"But we have had no kings for centuries" I said, "Surely that line died out long ago."

“Has it? Are you sure of that?” Jacob asked. “I have heard that there still walk this earth those who are descended in direct line from King David. They are a forgotten people, a hidden people. But their day will come.”

We sat pondering that in the silence. It had got very dark. Deep in our conversation we had forgotten to keep the fire going. It was almost out. It was just at that moment that something happened that changed our lives for ever.

I have often tried to find words to describe what happened, but my best words seem inadequate somehow. The only word that will do is light, but light as you have never seen it. Imagine you are in deep darkness and then suddenly there is light. Not the light of a torch or of a fire, but of lightning lighting up the sky from east to west. It was like that only warmer and more constant, like the light of the sun shining in all its brilliance.

And at the same time as the light there was a person. In fact the light seemed to be coming from the person and was all around us. Don't ask me to describe the person. I could not. We were all in no doubt that he was a heavenly messenger and we were terrified. The thoughts going through my head were: This is the end. I wish I'd lived a better life. I wish I'd loved my wife

and children more. There were certain things that rose up before me that I wish I had never done.

Then the messenger spoke. And instead of it being a harsh, terrifying, condemning voice, it was deep and soft and gentle, yet incredibly powerful all at the same time. The first thing he said was, "Don't be afraid!" There was something in the calm authority of the voice that quietened and comforted us. It was as if all our worries and fears were groundless, because there was no power on earth or in hell that could countermand that voice.

"Don't be afraid" he said. "I have good news for you, good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born today in David's Town the Saviour who is Christ the Lord. And this is the sign for you: You will find the baby wrapped up warmly but lying in a cattle trough."

Before we had time to think about what all this meant, suddenly there appeared all around and beside and above the messenger whole legions of other heavenly messengers singing praise to God: "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to the human race with whom God is delighted!"

I don't know how long it went on for, but it seemed for hours, the voices swelling and rising and falling again. It was music, but not of this world. Then almost as suddenly as it started, it was over. The light went up faster than our eyes could take in, up into the

sky that was now starry, disappearing beyond our sight.

We looked at each other. It wasn't like waking from a dream, because as we looked in each other's eyes, we knew we had all seen and heard the same thing.

It was Simeon who broke the silence. "Let's go and see then," he said. "Yes, let's go to Bethlehem," said Melki. "Yes, let's do it," shouted Judah, "Let's go and see what's happened." "Let's see what the Lord has revealed!" Jacob added.

"But what about the sheep?" asked young Eliud, just as we were about to set out, "Some of us will have to stay." An argument was just about to break out when Jacob said, "No. No one needs to stay with the sheep. If the Lord has told us to go to Bethlehem to see the newborn King, I'm sure the Lord will look after the sheep. After all, he is our Shepherd. And anyway, if the Saviour is truly come, there may be no need for lambs to be sold for slaughter ever again."

With that we set out for Bethlehem, trying to stick together, but with Eliud always running ahead and Jacob always taking up the rear. And as we went, we kept going over what we'd been told: "Good news of great joy... and it's for everyone (not just the priests and the rulers and rich people!)... it's the Christ—God's anointed king—that's born... and what did he call

him?... The Lord!... Does that mean God himself has come?... Well, remember the prophet Isaiah said the child would be called Immanuel (God with us)... And he called him Saviour... perhaps he will set us free from the Romans and the priests!... or perhaps he'll save us from ourselves and set us free from our sins... and they sang about peace on earth... and God being delighted with human beings... What can it all mean?"

In this way the distance to Bethlehem quickly passed and we soon found ourselves standing in the main street. But that's when the problem struck us. We knew we were looking for a newborn baby lying in a cattle trough, but how were we to start looking for it in the whole of Bethlehem? That's when the quick brain of Judah did some rapid deductions. "Look," he said, "If he's in a trough, a manger, his parents are unlikely to live here, so he's unlikely to be in a house. His parents are probably here to register for this census thing, and the birth came unexpectedly. I would look first in all the inns."

It didn't take us long then to track him down, and although the innkeeper took a little persuasion to let us into his stable, we finally saw him. And it was just as the angel had said: the baby was wrapped up warmly, but lying in a manger, with all the donkeys and one or two camels lying around. He just looked an ordinary baby to us. There seemed nothing out of the ordinary

about him, only we knew he was absolutely extraordinary.

His mother's name was Mary and she wanted to know all about how we knew about the birth. When we told her, she got very excited and told us how the angel Gabriel had appeared to her and told her that her baby would be the Son of God, and her husband Joseph had been told in a dream by another angel that the baby should be called Jesus (which means "God saves") because he would save his people from their sins.

We talked with Mary and her husband Joseph long into the night, and we began to understand things better. A lot of the loose ends we had in our talk earlier in the evening began to get tied up. But there was still so much to learn, so much we didn't know.

Eventually we realised it was approaching dawn. It would soon begin to get light. We had to go. Out on the streets people were beginning to be up and about. Everyone we met we told what the angel had told us, and that it was true. It was just as the angel had said. We were as high as kites. We were shouting and laughing and singing praise to God. Everyone we told was amazed. We knew some were doubting how it was shepherds like us that had the good news announced to them first, but we didn't care, we just went on singing and shouting and telling everyone who cared to listen.

All this happened a long time ago. I'm an old man now. But now I know it has all come true, but not as many expected. From the very start the authorities were out to destroy him. King Herod didn't want another king of the Jews. One of the very last things he did before he died was to kill all the boys under two years old in Bethlehem. But Jesus was far away by then. He grew up in Galilee—Galilee of the nations—in Nazareth, and even there they tried to kill him. The religious authorities finally caught up with him in Jerusalem, and they trumped up charges and had the Roman Governor put him to death. But the strange thing is he said he had come to die—to lay down his life for the sheep—to give his life as a ransom for many—his blood was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

What do I say to it all now? I say what I said on the streets of Bethlehem that day so long ago. There's good news of great joy for the whole world. The Saviour has been born for you. He is Christ the Lord. Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to the human race.

And I would just add this. He is the shepherd, of course. But he is also the lamb. There is now no need for any more sacrifices. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Isaiah 8:19—9:7

Luke 2:1-20

Psalm 23 (Sing Psalms, © Free Church of Scotland)