

New Year, New Beginnings Naming and circumcision of Jesus

Good morning. May I wish you a very Happy and Blessed New Year.

I imagine quite a few of us are pretty glad to shut the door on 2022.

For many of us, our hearts and our spirits, and in some cases our bodies too, have taken quite a battering over the past year. We are horrified to witness the continuing war in Europe as it takes its painful toll on many thousands of lives; we hear of widespread atrocities against our Christian brothers and sisters; huge numbers of people in Africa are living in fear due to relentless civil war or terrorist insurgency; in the West drug addiction blights the lives of millions of people (2022 saw the UK crowned with the dubious title of the 'addiction capital of Europe'); many people are subsumed by debt, The Office for National Statistics tells us that half of all children in the UK now come from separated households, and the economic challenges look like continuing well into the future.

So we look back on what has been a difficult year for so many, in some cases ourselves included. We pray that in this new year we will be able to share more love, joy, hope and faith in our communities and our needy world, and I'd like to suggest that the shepherds whose story Alison just read to us might have something to teach us about making it so.

I wonder how you envisage the shepherds? They would have been tough; life would have been hard; they were out in all weathers with little opportunity for the comfort of home and family; I imagine arthritis was a common and painful problem. Pope Francis referred to the need for Catholic priests to be 'shepherds who smell of the sheep.' He was of course recalling these shepherds on the hillside in Bethlehem who would certainly have done so - literally as well as metaphorically! As shepherds it would have been impossible for them to conform to the religious ceremonial laws expected of observant Jews.

On the other hand, they had a very special job to do. The sacrificial system of Temple worship required that a spotless lamb be provided for sacrifice each morning and each evening and these lambs were taken from special flocks pastured around Bethlehem. (What glorious symmetry that the perfect Lamb of God was born in the same place as all the little unblemished lambs that had foreshadowed Him as He became the one true perfect sacrifice for sin).

That night was probably no different from any other - perhaps by now the sheep were safely gathered into the fold for the night, and the shepherds, despite being constantly on the lookout for predators, could relax a little; cook a meal over the makeshift open fire, catch up on the events of the day, look up at the night sky and trace the familiar movements of the stars and planets, tell stories, some perhaps recalled from the Scriptures they'd learnt as boys.

Just another average night with no expectation of anything different.

But then, in a moment, everything changes, and life will never be the same again. The Message puts it this way '*Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm*

here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Saviour has just been born in David's town, a Saviour who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger. At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises: Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.

Into this quiet, ordinary night, had stepped an angel of the Lord! This was the moment when everything changed for the shepherds; suddenly they were on a brand new trajectory, and the first step on their new journey was to act in obedience to the angel and decide to go looking for the baby.

As an aide memoir on this first Sunday of the year, I'd like to suggest 5 P's that describe the change the shepherds underwent. The first is PURPOSE.

The shepherds didn't need any persuading. 'Let's go!' they said.

They were no longer just shepherds watching sheep - they had been chosen by the Lord of hosts to visit the tiny baby who was the long awaited Messiah, the Saviour of the world! That really was some PURPOSE..

Now Christmas card representations of the shepherds making their way to Bethlehem depict them, crooks in hand, standing on the brow of the hill gazing with wonder over the little town, perhaps trying to catch, on the still night air, a cry of the newborn baby they'd been told about; or they may be depicted sedately winding their way down the hillside; but I imagine them making WHOOPEE, crooks flung in the air, Quentin Blake style, jumping over the rocks and the mole hills, dashing down the hill into the town as fast as their arthritic legs would carry them. However it happened, they'd made the decision and they followed through on it.

That brings us to our 2nd P, which stands for PRIORITY. In just a few minutes, their PRIORITIES had changed beyond all recognition.

Is there something that's happened in the past year that's changed your PRIORITIES for the one that's just beginning? I'm not talking about New Year's resolutions which are often discarded before the Christmas tree is even taken down, but about God given opportunities for a change of focus in the coming year. The shepherds listened to the message of the angel; are we listening for the prompting of the Lord? They didn't just hear it, they listened to it.

John Wesley, who was a hard taskmaster with regard to his own spiritual discipline as well as other peoples', had a list of searching questions which he asked himself daily. One of them was 'Do I give the Bible time to speak to me every day?' It's something I want to focus on in the coming year. We're all busy people but, with the Lord's help, I want to be sure to prioritise those things that really matter. Prayer and Bible reading have to be right at the top of that list.

The shepherds followed through immediately on their decision. For them in their situation that was exactly the right thing to do but timing is always vitally important, and very often the Lord's timing is quite, quite different from our own! I can easily call to mind at least 3 major instances in my life where my idea of the timing of

something important hasn't been in line with the Lord's and I've had to wait. I'm sure I'm not alone in that.

Sometimes it can feel as if taking a potentially transformational decision is the easy part of effecting change. Following through on it, considering and reconsidering the pros and cons, discussing it with others who will be affected, bringing them with you as you think things through - these things can be more taxing. It can be really hard to be single minded and not swayed by others' views.

I love James's epistle; and straight talking James has some well chosen words for those he calls '*double minded - unstable in every way.*' He has a point. '*Those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty*' he tells us '*and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - will be blessed in their doing*'. '*Do not be hearers of the word only; be doers also*' he tells us. The shepherds were frightened hearers, but enthusiastic doers.

Their action was well rewarded. They not only saw but recognised and responded **to** the infant Son of God! The Lord, who looks '*not on the outward appearance but on the heart*' chose them to receive the gift of PERCEPTIVENESS - our 3rd P of the morning. PERCEPTIVENESS is defined as '*being characterised by sympathetic understanding or insight*'. All of us know people who have this special gift and it's always a blessing to those around them. We only need to think about the ways in which Jesus not only saw but really perceived those who were ready to accept His gifts of healing, or to hear His call to follow Him, to see what a glorious difference it made to those on the receiving end.

The shepherds were blessed beyond words to be the first to be called to meet with Jesus. They must have been overwhelmed and, I imagine, moved to tears by the enormity of the sight before them as they worshipped the little One lying in the manger. Their gaze was more than physical sight; they saw with the eyes of their hearts. Others looking on the newborn Jesus would have seen a baby - always a wonderful gift - but they saw the Lord Himself.

I wonder who or what we might have observed in the past year? Might we need to revisit some people or situations where, on reflection, we recognise that we need to look again, this time with the eyes of our hearts? Let's ask the Lord for His perceptiveness in 2023.

And then our 4th P is for PRESENTING what we have learnt. The shepherds '*spread (presented) the word concerning what had been told them about this Child, and all who heard it were amazed*'. Sharing what we know can be absolutely vital. For those who heard the message of the shepherds, it must have set their hearts racing. The long promised Messiah had come at last - and to their own town! As we've already noted, we need to be sure of the Lord's timing in this, but very often we're given the privilege of receiving a word, or a thought or a picture, not just to bless us - although of course it does! - but to bless others. It may be challenging to

share these insights, but it's always worthwhile. Pray for the right opportunity to PRESENT what the Lord has shared with you, just as the shepherds did.

And then finally, our 5th P is for PERSEVERANCE. The shepherds returned. They went back to looking after sheep. Perhaps as they made their way back up the hill to their flocks they talked together about what the future might look like for them. We know nothing about their stories other than the snapshot of that single night, but we can be sure that whilst their occupation may not have changed, their **pre**occupation certainly will have done.

The final verse of our reading concerns the naming and circumcision of Jesus. Jesus - meaning 'The Lord is Salvation' - the name given to Him, not just before only He was born, but before He was even conceived. Before He was a foetus in Mary's womb - The Lord is Salvation; before He was born - The Lord is Salvation; as He was named & circumcised, Anna & Simeon perceived the Lord who is Salvation; as He ministered, people found Him to be the Lord, who is salvation; as He died, the Lord of love purchased for us salvation; as He rose, ascended and was glorified, He proved Himself the Lord who is (still) salvation. Jesus - the Christ who is salvation, whose Name and nature are unchanging - the same yesterday, today and for ever.

So, on this New Year's Day 2023, may the Lord give to us the gifts He gave to the shepherds, fresh **Purpose**; His **Priorities** to take precedence over our own; the beauty of **Perceptiveness**; His enabling and confidence to **Present** what we have experienced to others; and may He help us to **Persevere** throughout the coming year. In Jesus' Name.

Amen

Home Group Discussion Questions

Please read the passage from Luke 2. I suggest reading vv. 8-21.

After a very brief review of some of the troubles of 2022, we looked at 5 words beginning with the letter P as a mnemonic for lessons we might learn from the shepherds to take us into 2023.

- 1 **Purpose.** A new year holds much promise. I suggested that as we move into 2023 we might pray to 'be able to share more love, joy, hope and faith in our communities and our needy world'. Please take some time to consider what each of us might do to further God's Kingdom in the coming year
 - a) as individuals, and
 - b) as a church
- 2 **Priorities.** The start of a new year is a great opportunity to reconsider our priorities. Is there anything we need to lay aside in order to make more room for the Lord, in terms of our time, resources or gifts?
Do we make time to really listen - to Him; to others?
- 3 **Perceptiveness.** Defined as 'being characterised by sympathetic understanding or insight', perceptiveness is a gift we should all earnestly desire.
How have we been blessed by the perceptiveness of others?
Who or what in our own sphere of influence do we see or observe, but fail to really perceive? In 2023, how might we better look with the eyes of our hearts?
- 4 **Presenting.** The shepherds did not hesitate to 'spread the word concerning what had been told them about this Child, and all who heard it were amazed' v.17.
Why are we so often less than enthusiastic about presenting to others the life changing truth we know and have experienced?
We considered James' command 'do not be hearers of the word only; be doers also' (James 1.22) in relation to the shepherds' changed priorities, but it applies here too.
Remembering that we can 'present' with our actions as well as with our words, discuss ways in which we either do, or could, use, the opportunities we have to share God's message of hope with others.
- 5 **Perseverance.** Looking back on 2022, consider times when it was hard to keep going, and share ways in which we were encouraged.
'Mary treasured (the shepherds') words and pondered them in her heart' v.19

Let's treasure these shared thoughts and encouragements and pop them into our armoury for the next time we're called upon to persevere.